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**THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF  
THAI CONTEMPORARY ARTS AND ARTISTS:  
A CASE STUDY OF THAI INDEPENDENT CINEMA**

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สถาบันวิทยบริการ  
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วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้ศึกษาถึงการเกิดขึ้นและพัฒนาการของศิลปะร่วมสมัยไทยและศิลปินไทย โดยใช้ทฤษฎีการครองความเป็นเจ้า (Hegemony) ของอันโตนิโอ กรัมสกี (Antonio Gramsci) ในการศึกษาวิเคราะห์ถึงการเกิดขึ้นของศิลปะและศิลปินจากมุมมองของสุนทรียภาพและนโยบายด้านวัฒนธรรม

การศึกษาพบว่าศิลปินต้องเผชิญกับความท้าทายในสองลักษณะ ได้แก่แนวคิดด้านศิลปะและการสร้างความทันสมัยของประเทศไทย โดยในส่วนของกรวิจัยพบว่าศิลปินรุ่นใหม่ได้สร้างผลงานทางศิลปะรูปแบบใหม่ ที่ลดช่องว่างระหว่างความเป็นศิลปะบริสุทธิ์และความเป็นวัฒนธรรมประชานิยม รวมทั้งมีการแสวงหาแนวทางการสร้างสรรค์ใหม่ ๆ ที่แตกต่างไปจากจารีตของศิลปะประเพณีนิยมของไทยและศิลปะสากล ในส่วนที่สองพบว่าผลงานศิลปะในแนวคิดใหม่นี้มีลักษณะที่ท้าทายการครอบงำทางความคิดของวาทกรรมอำนาจในสังคมไทยจากอิทธิพลและผลกระทบของกระแสโลกาภิวัตน์

งานวิจัยนี้ได้วิเคราะห์เกี่ยวกับเรื่องอำนาจนิยมในสังคมไทย โดยศึกษาวาทกรรมหลัก ๓ ประการได้แก่ ๑. อัตลักษณ์ความเป็นไทย (Thai identity) ๒. ความมีอารยธรรมหรือความศิวิไลซ์ (Siwilai) และ ๓. เพศสภาวะ (sexuality) จากการศึกษาผลงานภาพยนตร์กระแสหลักและภาพยนตร์ของกลุ่มศิลปินอิสระพบว่า ผู้สร้างภาพยนตร์กระแสหลักนำเสนอานที่สนับสนุนวาทกรรมหลักของสังคมไทยโดยเน้นประเด็นด้านความรักชาติ ในขณะที่กลุ่มศิลปินอิสระนำเสนอผลงานที่ท้าทายวาทกรรมหลัก โดยการเสนอภาพด้านตรงข้ามกับความเป็นไทย สำหรับเรื่องความมีอารยธรรมนั้น ภาพยนตร์กระแสหลักเสนอภาพชาวชนบท ชนกลุ่มน้อย และประเทศเพื่อนบ้านในลักษณะความสัมพันธ์เชิงสัมพันธ์ตามระดับความมากน้อยของอารยธรรม ในทางตรงข้ามภาพยนตร์ของกลุ่มศิลปินอิสระเสนอภาพที่ให้ความเข้าใจหรือเห็นอกเห็นใจคนกลุ่มนี้ และในเรื่องเพศสภาวะของกลุ่มรักร่วมเพศ ภาพยนตร์กระแสหลักจะมองเรื่องนี้จากบรรทัดฐานของความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างหญิงและชายทำให้คนกลุ่มนี้มีภาพน่าขมและผิดแปลกแตกต่างหรือเป็นอื่น ในขณะที่ภาพยนตร์ของศิลปินอิสระจะสื่อเรื่องราวจากสายตาของกลุ่มผู้มีสภาวะรักร่วมเพศโดยตรงไป ตรงมา เพื่อเปิดพื้นที่ให้กับคนกลุ่มนี้ในเวทีสาธารณะเช่นสื่อภาพยนตร์

ผลงานวิจัยฉบับนี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่ากลุ่มศิลปินอิสระที่เกิดขึ้นใหม่ พยายามที่จะนำเสนอรูปแบบทางศิลปะที่เป็นเอกลักษณ์ของตนเองที่แสดงถึงสุนทรียภาพและแนวความคิดที่ท้าทายวาทกรรมหลักของสังคมไทย นอกจากนี้ ยังมีกรรวมกลุ่มกันเป็นเครือข่ายทางความคิดและทำงานร่วมกัน ซึ่งลักษณะการรวมกลุ่มทางสังคมเช่นนี้มีแนวโน้มที่จะเป็นกลุ่มปัญญาชนที่นำเสนอแนวคิดต่อต้านความเป็นอำนาจนิยม.

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KEY WORD: CONTEMPORARY ARTS / THAI CINEMA / HEGEMONY / GLOBALIZATION / CULTURAL POLITICS / IDENTITY

TAKAYUKI AKIBA: THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THAI CONTEMPORARY ARTS AND ARTISTS: A CASE STUDY OF THAI INDEPENDENT CINEMA. THESIS ADVISOR: ASSOC. PROF. UBONRAT SIRIYUVASAK, Ph.D. 184 pp.

This thesis aims at studying the emergence and development of Thai contemporary arts and artists. It attempts to analyze the cultural politics of emergent arts and artists, Thai cinema in particular, from the aesthetics perspective by using Gramscian theory of hegemony.

The analysis reveals that the artists are challenging two notions: the notion of art and the imaginary Thainess constructed in the period of modernization/nation-building. Firstly the study examines that newly emerging Thai artists and their artworks create possibilities to deconstruct conventions of arts in both Thai and international art sphere by using novel and experimental artistic styles and blurring a distinction between art and popular culture. Secondly this thesis examines how it is that the new Thai artists and their artworks challenge Thai hegemony emerged by a narrative of globalization. The study, on one hand, considers that Thai hegemony created by Siamese/Thai elites roots in the mind of Thai artists and its spectators and reflects in their artworks. On the other hand, the new emergent artists and their artworks develop possibilities to challenge Thai hegemony by representing marginalized subjectivities. This study explores how the identity crisis in the globalization era brought about the phenomenon.

The thesis looks at the cinematic images of three main concepts; namely Thai national identity, *siwilai* (or civilized nation) and sexuality by juxtaposing mainstream imageries with the visual and narrative construction in contemporary alternative cinema. The analysis reveals that mainstream filmic works use Thai hegemonic ideas for their expression while independent artists challenge it through alternative portrayals of un-Thainess and the marginal. In filmic representations of Thai national identity, mainstream Thai cinema portrays confrontation between Thainess and un-Thainess and generates nationalistic sentiment while independent filmmakers deal with subjectivities on un-Thainess. Likewise mainstream film portrayals of rural people, ethnic minorities and neighboring countries show their relational views based on degrees of supposed civilization but independent arts represent the subjects more sympathetically. Recent popularity of homosexual subjects in Thai cinema conveys similar tension between mainstream queer cinema, mostly on socially visible transgender and transsexual, from the heterosexual point of view, and independent homosexual-theme films, mostly on gay and lesbian subject matters, focus on their identity and life, which consequently bring homosexuality into the public sphere.

The study shows that this group of emergent artists strives to express their identities both aesthetically and politically/socially, and their attitudes toward arts and society bring together like-minds with different backgrounds and form a new community. A community holds the possibility to become a group of intellectuals to challenge against the hegemonic power.

Field of study: Thai Studies

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## ABBREVIATIONS

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| AIDS  | Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome          |
| ASEAN | Association of South East Asian Nations      |
| BOI   | Board of Investment of Thailand              |
| DIY   | Do It Yourself                               |
| EGAT  | Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand |
| HIV   | Human Immunodeficiency Virus                 |
| HM    | Her Majesty                                  |
| IMF   | International Monetary Fund                  |
| MC    | Mom Chao                                     |
| NIB   | National Identity Board                      |
| NICs  | New Industrial Countries                     |
| OCAC  | Office of Contemporary Art and Culture       |
| UCLA  | University of California, Los Angeles        |
| USIS  | United States Information Service            |



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## Note on Spelling

Thai film titles in this thesis have been transliterated phonetically in accordance with Thai romanization software developed by the Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, which is available from <http://www.arts.chula.ac.th/~ling/tts/>. The program uses the principle of romanization by transcription method as proposed by the Royal Institute, Bangkok in 1954. However, in case that film title in Thai uses English or any other non-Thai languages as a part of its title, transliteration is accordance with English spelling. For example, ซาไกยูไนเต็ด was transliterated into “Sagai United” instead of “Sakai Yunaitet”. Similarly, if English title and Thai title are identical, English title is applied. For example, บางระจัน was transliterated into “Bangrajan”, English title of the film, instead of “Bang Rachan”. Names of film in transliterated Thai with italic, English with underline, and transliterated name of director(s), and production year are given in the first reference in each chapter, however only Thai title is used afterwards in the same chapter. Therefore, in the first reference of ซาไกยูไนเต็ด in each chapter, it will be *Sagai United* (Sagai United, Somching Srisuparp, 2004) and only Thai transliteration, *Sagai United*, is used afterwards in the same chapter.

Thai names have been spelled as ones widely known or accepted in English written documents including newspaper and internet articles. Especially romanized name of mainstream Thai film directors are accordance with [movie.seer.com](http://movie.seer.com), database-like contemporary Thai cinema information website in both Thai and English. Romanized names of independent filmmakers and independent film titles are based on catalogues of the Thai short film and video festival and the website of Thai Film Foundation and Thaiindie.

Conventionally Thai people are referred to by their first names while westerners are referred to by their surnames. In the references, Thai authors are listed according to first names.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

*"an imagined political community [that is] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign". (Anderson, 1991:6)*

If Thailand is an imagined community, the Thai government may not be so skillful in supplying its citizens with imaginary illusions of what it means to be Thai as much as Thai horror flicks are at supplying its viewers with illusions of terror. In 2006, the kingdom went through a military coup d'état shortly after celebrating its sixty-year monarchical anniversary. The political upheaval unveiled the stratum rooted in the country; rural indigents supporting the ousted populist prime minister, middle-class Bangkokians justifying the martial undertaking, and solitary Western-educated intellectuals who support neither of them. In the southern provinces, attacks by alleged separatist Muslims is a topic of daily news while saffron-robe monks in the capital insist on elevating the status of Buddhism as to be a state religion.

The M.A. course studies at Chulalongkorn University has revealed to me another essential and controversial distinction in the country's academic world, that is, the historiography of Thailand. Thai royalist nationalist historiography, established in the nation-building era by Siamese elites, has been ingrained in the pride of the majority of Thai citizens. Newly emergent historians, mostly Marxist-oriented, historians such as Thongchai Winichakul, challenged the tradition. Incidentally or naturally, Thai cinema spectatorship holds comparable parallels, as pointed out by Annette Hamilton (1994), who delineates three social groups that deeply underlie the conflicts of Thai film industry, namely conservative elites, Western-oriented bourgeoisie, and rural and provincial people. This piece of work draws inspirations from such disruptions in Thai politics, history and cinema.

In the era of globalization, Thai cinema has gone to international arenas and it seems to affect the distinctions in the Thai film industry as well. I, as a Thai film enthusiast, found that many of the films I follow are often not sought-after among Thais. Benedict Anderson (2005) examined the Cannes-winning *Sat Pralat* (Tropical Malady,

2004) by Apichatpong Weelasetakul to point out that Bangkokians either do not know about or comprehend the film, while international and rural audiences are attracted to it. Yet, is it not natural for people in democratic countries like Thailand to follow their own political ideas and cinematic tastes? A number of films produced by Thai auteurs, filmed in Thai and shot in Thailand, are actually appreciated by many foreigners but few Thais. Observations of Thai contemporary cinema disclose a sharp contrast between mainstream commercial movies for Thais and independent films treasured by international cinephiles.

This divide is not exclusive to Thai cinema. In June 2007, I was at a party in Bangkok to celebrate the launch of two new Bangkok-based English-language publications; a monthly contemporary Thai art guide entitled the “Thailand Art & Design Guide”, and a free publication on contemporary art information in the city, “Bangkok Art Map”. Full of art lovers and those in the arts field, the attendees were mostly *farang*, which means Caucasians in Thai language, and some of them, but in fewer number than the Westerners, were Thai. One Thai artist made an ironic remark that Thais are not interested in Thai contemporary art -- those who are supportive are foreigners.

*Farangs* are not the only foreigners interested in Thai culture, however. Beginning in the early 2000s, some leading Japanese magazines on popular culture, including Studio Voice (2003), Eyes cream (2004), and Esquire Japan (2004), have published issues featuring the Bangkok contemporary culture scene, including articles on art, music, film, which they called “Bangkok Culture”. As these magazines are not Asian or Southeast-Asian focused but rather feature any up-to-date cultural phenomena, usually occurring in New York, London, Paris, Berlin or local Tokyo, the issues had enough impact to make some culturally sensitive Japanese readers conclude that Thailand is not only a tourist destination with solemn Buddhist temples and shiny beautiful beaches, but also home to a thriving cultural scene.

The publications mentioned above, both in and out of Thailand, indicate that newly emergent Thai contemporary arts, including cinema, are now subjects of discourse for Westerners and Japanese, but not Thais. Thailand’s participation in the Venice Biennale since 2003, one of the best-known art festivals, has made Thai contemporary arts and artists even more noticeable. Chiang Mai-based artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Navin Rawanchaikul, and Kamin Lertchaiprasert are now recognized as representatives



of Thai artists in international art circles and Thai cinema has become a regular visitor to international film festivals like Cannes and Berlin after the emergence of the so-called “Thai new wave” filmmakers Pen-ek Ratanaruang, Wisit Sasanatieng, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul in the late 1990s. Currently, Thai contemporary arts draw passionate international attention even as native spectators seem apathetic, and contemporary artists are always searching for foreign financial support and their films screen to largely empty theatres at home. As a non-Thai devotee residing in Thailand, this difference in enthusiasm between many Thais and foreign admirers, inside and outside the kingdom, inspired me to examine the parallel distinction between Thai historiography and cultural politics.

### **1.1 Objectives**

The objectives for this study are as follows:

1. To analyze the emergence and development of new types of artists, and how their works challenge Thai official hegemony.
2. To examine how Thai mainstream contemporary arts reflect hegemonic ideology and independent arts create possibilities to criticize such hegemony.

### **1.2 Research Questions and Hypothesis**

This thesis aims to examine the emergence and development of new artists and their work by exploring the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of these new types of arts and artists?
2. How has globalization influenced both mainstream arts/artists and newly emerging arts/artists?
3. How do the new emergent artists challenge hegemony?

Hypothesis:

1. They deconstruct the conventional notion of arts in Thailand and make the formal concept of art blurred.
2. Both mainstream and independent Thai contemporary arts react and are affected by

- issues of globalization, and the different reactions represent the distinctions between the two.
3. They choose marginal subjectivities as their identities in their artworks and convey their voices to speak to power.

### **1.3 Scope and Limitation of the Study**

There are some limitations for this study. This study defines contemporary arts as the arts since 1997 for its limitation. The year 1997 was and has been a watershed year for Thailand in various aspects. Firstly the country went through significant financial and political upheaval after the economic crisis and the establishment of the 1997 Constitution, which caused disturbance among Thais over the globalization, and reflected in the country's arts as well. Secondly, coincidentally or as a consequence of these events, Thai cinema industry went through a rebirth that same year. The debuts of filmmakers such as Nonzee Nimibutr and Pen-ek Ratanaruang who emerged from the advertisement field, attracted both domestic moviegoers and international cinephiles. According to Sudarat Musikawong (2007), the cinema revival was a direct result of the economic decline of the industry, as the lack of the budget for TV commercials encouraged advertising directors to become film auteurs. Japanese magazines opined that Bangkok culture is developed by Western-educated artists who were forced to come back to their homeland after losing financial support by the crisis. This study, however, does not examine the economics impact on Thai contemporary art.

Furthermore, the term "contemporary arts" is possibly ambiguous, but at the same time this is an intentional choice, as will be explained in more detail in Chapters III and VII. Briefly, the concept of arts, plural form, is a crucial notion in the politics of culture and aesthetics in the Thai contemporary art world. Yet the case studies in Chapters IV, V and VI will be restricted to one form of arts, Thai cinema after 1997, due to the limitation of my time and academic focus. Nevertheless this thesis will review the studies on contemporary Thai art by Pandit Chanrochanakit (2006) and contemporary Thai music by Manond Apinich (2003) in order to support my ideas about hegemony and contemporary Thai arts.

In addition, this thesis has to mention the limitation of the study due to Thai language reading skill of the author. Also, since this thesis studies the cultural phenomenon, which is an on-going process, hence many features may evolve further and not yet conclusive.

## **1.4 Conceptual Frameworks**

To clarify the distinct feature that can be seen in Thai contemporary arts, an explanation of a concept of hegemony, both in general and this study, is necessary. In addition to that, a concept of globalization and identities is briefly introduced to understand how a notion of hegemony works in the study of contemporary Thai arts.

### **1.4.1 Hegemony**

This study applies basic Gramscian idea of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) as its conceptual framework, that is, the perspective of this thesis towards Thai arts and artists is that some arts are associated with the country's dominant ideology and the others work as protests against them. Hegemony is originally discussed within a discourse of class struggle however this study does not take the term in narrow sense but applies basic idea of hegemony, that is, dominant ideology in the society. The "Thai hegemony" addressed in this study presents what I call the notion of Thai modernization, meaning the ideas that were built up in the period of modernization or nation-state building and that played dominant ideological roles in the country.

In the pre-modern period, Siam was an area with rival city-states. The Siamese nation-building process was launched by the country's elites as a reaction against Western imperial powers' colonization of Siam's neighbors. In the process, the kingdom shaped its geo-body (Thongchai, 1994) and a sense of Thai citizenship was introduced by the kingdom's elites. (Baechtold, 2005). During this time, many nationalistic policies were issued such as the Cultural Act in 1942. Noticing the similarity between the threat of colonization Siam experienced in the previous century and the turmoil over globalization that Thailand has encountered in the contemporary period, this thesis would argue that

the notions established in the nation-building period have become standard in Thai national dominant ideologies, and have been employed in the cultural politics of the globalization era. Similarly, Pandit (2006) presents the idea of the Siamese Diorama, an “inbuilt system of representation that envisions the national imaginary for Thai subjects” (p.vii) in his studies on contemporary Thai art. Even though he does not trace the origin of Siamese Diorama, his notion of Siamese diorama is similar to what I mean by the notion of modernization.

This study will address the three hegemonic ideologies established in the process of modernization by drawing on the work of Thongchai Winichakul (1994) and Pavin Chachavalpongpun (2005) for Thai national identity, and Thongchai (2001) for Thai hierarchical structural views within and without the country, and Peter Jackson (2004) for Thai regime of image. Nevertheless, the three hegemonic ideas are not completely different one another, and this study sees that they are inherent to one notion, the notion of modernization, which will be explained in the next section.

## **1.4.2 Thai hegemony**

### **1.4.2.1 Thai national identity**

Thainess, or *khwamphenthai*, is frequently used in theoretical discourse to describe common nature or identity of Thais, although there is no official definition of Thainess. Since the nation-building period, Thai national identity has been the subject of concern for Thai elites although this identity has been changed and modified according to time and context. Thongchai (1994:5) explains this ambiguous Thainess by using negative identification.

If the domain of what is Thainess is hard to define clearly, the domain of what is not Thai --- that is, un-Thai --- is identified from time to time. Simultaneously, this identification helps us to define the domain of Thainess from the outside.

On the other hand, Pavin (2005) insists that Thainess is empty and an imaginary product created by Thai elites for their specific purpose or private interests.

The significance of the idea is that Thai national identity has been made,

modified and utilized by the Thai state elites, and some of these notions have been deeply embedded in the psyche of masses in the form of slogans such as “nation, religion and monarchy.”

#### **1.4.2.2 Thai relational view**

According to Thongchai’s theories on modernization or “the quest of *Siwilai*<sup>1</sup>” (2000), the Siamese elites voluntarily modernized themselves, and most were intensely fond of Westerners and Western things, contrary to the conventional historiography that clever Siamese monarchs successfully modernized the kingdom to avoid Western imperialism. As for the notion of *siwilai* that Siamese elites held in esteem, he says, “there was no definitively essential quality of *siwilai*. The concept of *siwilai* was always relational, and the relative position of Siam on the civilization scale was conceivable by spatial discourses”(2000:529). This spatial relationship includes Thailand’s interior, and the viewpoint based on Bangkok as the center of Siam established the rural as backward, uneducated, and its ethnic minorities as uncivilizable. The idea of Thai relational views is relevant to understanding the view of contemporary artists.

#### **1.4.2.3 Thai Regime of Image**

Jackson (2004) proposed a Thai regime of images in order to explain the power controlling actions in public and private spheres. According to Jackson, the regime “emerged as a part of Siam’s response to the challenges presented by Western imperial powers”(2004:187). This is exemplified by the fact that historically the private and the public realms were not clearly divided and religious paintings included sexual scenes until the Western sense of sexuality or public/private was adopted as part of the process of modernization. In other words, Thai notion of obscenity including nakedness in public was forced to change by Siamese reaction to the West. The notions about nudity and obscenity are still strong in the present discourse in the country and are part of an

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<sup>1</sup> *Siwilai* is the word explaining “civilized” in Thai. See chapter V for more detail.

important context for attitudes on censorship.

These three Thai hegemonies are separately introduced for practical use, and applied in Chapter IV, V, and VI, respectively. However, this thesis understands that these ideas are inherent to the hegemonic ideology regarding the national image. For example, homosexuality is regarded as non-Thai (Sinnott, 2004) and uncivilized (Sopawan, 2006). The leaders such as King Vajiravudh and Phibun promoted Western (civilized) manners as Thai national policies while traditional and Chinese clothing was rejected as uncivilized and un-Thai (Sopawan, 2006). The notion of the national image, or what Jackson (2004) calls “Thai regime of image” is a Thai official hegemony discussed in this thesis, and this study argues that the new emergent independent filmmakers challenge the hegemony by using film narrative images.

### **1.4.3 Globalization**

Globalization is significant to an understanding of the emergence of Thai hegemony. Globalization is often understood as homogenization through borderless flows of capital, technology, people, culture, and so on. The rise of globalization in such areas as information technology, digitalization and American pop art, were very influential in Thai contemporary arts. However, at the same time, globalization is, as Ajurn Appradurai mentions, “... a deeply historical uneven and even localizing process. Globalization does not necessarily or even frequently imply homogenization or Americanization” (1996:17). According to Manfred Steger (2003:13), “globalization refers to a multidimensional set of social processes that create, multiply, stretch and intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges while at the same time fostering in people a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant”. Roland Robertson (1995: 30) uses the term, glocalization, to explain the process of globalization that, “the concept of globalization has involved the simultaneity and the interpenetration of what are conventionally called the global and the local”. Globalization is, therefore, not only the spread of globality or globalism, but also is a very local process as well. The study will look at globalization as not only a phenomenon bringing about new

perspectives to Thai arts but also a trigger of the emergence of Thai hegemony. In other words, globalization evoked the threat of colonization in Thai history and allowed new leading power in the country, namely state elites, business sector and the bourgeoisie, to employ the hegemonic notion of modernization in order to express their feeling as well as to appeal to the masses.

#### **1.4.4 Identities**

The notion of cultural identity is traditionally understood as fixed and coherent, which is rooted in the past or memory. However, recently the idea of identity began to be understood as routes rather than roots. Stuart Hall (1996:4) mentioned that “identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves”.

This study sees that the idea of identities as routes is important to understand the new contemporary Thai artists. In other words, Thai hegemony tries to use the national identity, which rooted in the history, and enforced it on Thai citizens while the artists escape from and challenge the enforcement by applying their identities gained at their routes. In other words, independent filmmakers started to talk about themselves or their subjects through the medium, that is, filmmaking is a route of their cultural identities.

#### **1.4.5 Thai Independent Cinema**

Independent films are films made by non-major film studio with small budget. Sudarat (2007:251) explains, “The concept of ‘independent’ meant being economically independent from major studios and conglomerates as well as being ‘independent’ in spirit, vision, and content.” This study does not define the distinction between Thai mainstream and independent cinema by measuring production cost. By contrast, it is the independent spirit of filmmakers which is the focus of this study. In Thailand, the popularity of independent music in the mid-1990 became a trigger for the independent

culture boom, including film, among Thai youth. The digital video technology and the opening of the short film festival, which focus on independent film, boosted this popularity, and many independent films by the professional directors as well as do-it-yourself amateurs and students have been made. This study examines the filmic works of professional non-mainstream filmmakers, whose works are available at a movie theater, as well as film students and young semi-professional filmmakers.

### **1.5 Research Methodology**

This study is based on document research as well as analysis and observations on Thai arts. Since the study apply Thai cinema for the case studies, it included both mainstream and independent films. The list of cinema used for the analysis and discussion, is available at the end of this thesis, Appendix pages. In addition, I visited the Thai Film Foundation office on a weekly basis for one academic semester from June to November 2006, and joined the 10<sup>th</sup> (2006) and 11<sup>th</sup> (2007) annual Thai Short Film and Video Festival as an observer. On both visits to the Foundation and my participation in the festival, I spoke with filmmakers and film activists and viewed a wide variety of Thai cinematic works.

### **1.6 Outline**

This thesis consists of eight chapters, including this introduction.

Chapter II looks at the history of cultural politics in Thailand. Since the emergence of the concept of art in a modern sense, art has been used by Siamese and Thai elites. Especially in the nation-building era as Thailand, culture had been a tool to help create Thai identity, and Thainess has been a concern and focus of Thai elites since then. In addition to the states' cultural policy, I will review how art, cinema and popular music have been used and responded to by the state up to the current globalization period.

Chapter III examines the backgrounds of contemporary arts from the perspective of globalization and localization, by primarily focusing on the boom of "indie" culture and the emergence of artists blurring the distinction between art and popular culture, and



their challenges against conventional idea on art. Historically, with the rise of globalization manifested in such areas as information technology, digitalization and American pop art, contemporary Thai arts have taken on a new perspective. Many leading Thai contemporary artists use various methods to produce their works, including digital art, new-media art, installation, public art as along with new types of art forms. New developing arts from Thai cultural and art-historical perspectives are discussed in the chapter as well.

From Chapter IV to Chapter VI, the study will examine the impact of globalization and localization on contemporary Thai cinema from a cultural-politics approach.

Chapter IV examines post-crisis Thai cinema as a case study of the globalization and Thai national identity. As country's cultural politics saw a rise in nationalistic sentiment in the era of globalization, cinema after the economic crisis also expresses a comparable influence from Thai royal nationalist-based historiography. The chapter examines the possibility of popular nationalism in Thai mainstream cinema and the response from independent films countering the trend in a challenge to hegemonic historiography.

Chapter V looks at a relational viewpoint based on a *siwilai*, or civilized degree, in post-crisis Thai cinema. The section presents a relational worldview including domestic subjects in its representation of Thai cinema and its similarity to that of elites more than a century ago, what Thongchai calls "the quest for *siwilai*"(2000). Furthermore I will analyze Thai independent film movement as the politicized counter position to hegemonic cinema, and will compare it to the politicized film-for-life movement in 1970s' Thailand.

Chapter VI examines the emergence of queer cinema in Thailand. The chapter will examine how homosexuality has been stigmatized in Thailand in light of the concept of Thai image of public and private, or what Jackson calls "the Thai regime of image" (2004), another product of modernization. The study considers the emergence of homosexual theme films from independent artists as an influence of globalization, which brought them a sense of identity, as well as a significant symbol against hegemonic notions of image.

Chapter VII investigates Thai contemporary artist communities and possibilities to look at them as a movement. As this thesis argues for the political importance of new independent artists, this chapter attempts to look at their role in the cultural politics, or specifically identity politics. This chapter examines the necessity of looking at their art community as a group of intellectual, in keeping with Edward Said's understanding (1994), along with journalists, activists or academics.

This study seeks to demonstrate that the independent arts phenomenon is partly political, but not politicized like the art-for-life movement in the 1970s. The artists are questioning and responding to notion of modernity, which has been hegemonic as intentionally created by country' elites and touched upon the artists' identities. But at the same time, the artists are pursuing their aesthetics, which is why their work appeals to wide international audience and a few core domestic fans.



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## CHAPTER II

### HISTORY OF CULTURAL POLITICS IN THAI ART, CINEMA AND POPULAR MUSIC

Art and politics have been linked together from the time when the concept of art came into Thailand during the process of modernization. Pandit Chanrochanakit (2005:43) explains, "There was no Thai word for 'art' in the modern or Western sense" and "the production of Siamese – that is, pre-modern – art was intended to offer religious merit an support the political elite." He continues, "the term *silapa* acquired the meaning as 'art' during the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910-1925)". From the early twentieth century, the monarchy has claimed the official ideology of "nation, religion and monarchy" and the three elements have been regarded as the root of Thai identity, or Thainess. The ideology has become hegemonic, and has been modified from time to time and utilized in the country's cultural politics. This chapter will review the history of the relationship between politics and arts in Thailand before the globalization period in the 1990s, which saw the emergence and development of new contemporary arts.

#### 2.1 Cultural Politics from the 1930s to 1970s

Thai cultural policy first emerged in 1932 after the dissolution of the system of absolute monarchy. Field Marshall Plaek Phibunsongkram, or Phibun in short, helped engineer a cultural policy strategy in order to shift Thai people from regarding themselves as subjects of a king to citizens of a nation (Baechtold, 2005). Prime Minister Phibun and his propagandist Luang Wichit Wathakan, Director-General of the Department of Fine Arts (1935-1942) developed a cultural policy called human revolution together with modernization, for the purpose of building a Thai national identity. Apinan (1992) says the role of Luang Wichit was crucial in the history of Thai modern art.

Along with the Cultural Mandates of 1938 to 1942, which promoted the Thai national anthem, flag and language, the government issued official *rathaniyom* or regulations to outlaw behaviors the government deemed barbaric or outmoded, such as chewing betel nut or wearing *jongraben* clothing. 1942's Cultural Act aimed to promote

national unity and people's morality by governing appropriate dress, public manners, and advocating honor to nation and Buddhism. If citizens failed to comply with the act, they were punished by forfeit (Connors, 2006).

Naturally these nationalistic cultural policies made use of art forms as well. In 1941, the Ministry of Culture and the National Council for Culture sought to raise the nationalistic consciousness both the masses and elites by reviving folksongs, local dances and stage performance (Apinan, 1992). Public monuments built during this period are clear examples of propagandistic art. The construction of the Democracy Monument in 1939 in order to celebrate the National Day and the success of the shift from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one in 1932 promoted mass and elite nationalism as well as a sense of revolutionary soul. The scenes depicted on the monument panels were easily recognized ones like "the monarchy presenting the constitution to the people, the people paying respect to the constitution, and the soldiers and civilians making plans for the coup d'etat". (Apinan, 1992:38). The dramatic event in 1932 was also recorded in a film called "Coup d'etat Siam and Revolution" which became Thailand's first political documentary film.

The Victory Monument, built in 1941, is another nationalistic art project constructed by the regime. The monument was dedicated to the memory of fifty-nine Thais who lost their lives in the Thai-Indo China border conflict in 1940. Many of the monuments such as the statues of national heroine Thao Suranaree in Nakon Ratchasima (1934), King Vajiravudh in front of Bangkok's Lumpini park (1941), and King Taksin in Bangkok (1937, completed in 1953) were erected in this era assisted by Italian professor Silpa Bhirasri, considered the father of Thai modern art (Apinan, 1992)

Phibun also made political films, which encouraged nationalism and military idealism, before and during World War II. *Lueat Thahan Thai (The Blood of Thai Soldiers)* in 1934 is said to be the first political feature film made in Thailand. The Ministry of Defense commissioned the film, which advocated for conscription by emphasizing on the necessity of possessing a strong military force in case the Western powers invaded Thailand (Hamilton, 1994; Anchalee, 2004c). In his first premiership from 1938 to 1944, Phibun explored the potential of motion pictures as propaganda. In 1940 he bought studios from a bankrupt production firm, the Thai Film Company, and

produced the documentary and feature-length propaganda films (Anchalee, 2004c). In 1941, although they did not complete the project, Thai and Japanese cinematographers collaborated to produce *Nakbin Klangkhuen* (Night Flight) to promote the heroism of Thai and Japanese military men. *Ban Rai Na Rao* (Our Farm, Our Home) in 1942 focused on farmers' elevated social status. According to Chalida Uabumrungjit (2001), the film depicted an idealized vision of Thai farmers in an attempt to arouse Thai nationalism by creating an image of the prosperity of the nation. Extensive flood damage during the same year prompted Phibun to produce *Namthuam Di Kwa Fon Laeng* (Flood is Better Than Drought) which targeted those who lost sources of income in the calamity. Sakdina (cited in Anchalee, 2004c) says, "Even film-goers were controlled in the name of nationalism. The scenes flashed on screen all pushed the message that Plaek was eminently capable of keeping their country secure. Prior to each screening, the audience had to stand while the song "Maha Tongchai" was played. This was a mark of respect to Field Marshall Plaek."

Another notable political film of the period is *Phrachao Changphueak* (The King of the White Elephant, 1940) made by Pridi Banomyong, another leader of the bloodless coup in 1932. It was produced in 1941 with the crew of the Thai Film Company before the production went bankrupt and was taken over by Phibun's Royal Air Force in 1942. The film is an homage to the moral king, Chakra of Ayodhya, who won a battle against Hongsa (present day Burma). According to the film, this great king told the soldiers of Hongsa that what he wanted was peace, not a war. The film is understood as presenting Pridi's opposition to Phibun's nationalism and involvement in World War II, and the use of English language for the dialogue conveyed the stance of Thailand to the rest of world. The film was shown in Bangkok, Singapore and New York, which Annette Hamilton (1994:148) supposes, "Dr. Pridi's intention, it seems, was to ensure his nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize, but the Thai military government of the time led the country into World War II on the side of the Japanese instead." Whether his message was accurately relayed was unknown, but Sunait Chutintaranond (2006), a historian on Thai-Burmese relations, points out the film may have not been entirely successful as the Burmese were upset with how badly the king of Hongsa was presented although that was not Pridi's intention.

After Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat overthrew Phibun, he abolished the former leader's Ministry of Culture, which Phibun had established in his second term from 1948 to 1957. The cultural policies in the Sarit regime (1958 to 1963) focused on promoting the kingship, which Phibun had weakened by invalidating absolute monarchy, and Buddhism in the form of traditional royal ceremonies or Buddhist holidays (Connors, 2006). This shift of monarchical stature is visible in Thai art as well. King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit opened painter Piriya Krairiksh's 1963 Siam Society exhibition. Works included portraits of the King and other dignitaries, and made the painter a pioneer in conventional portraits in Thai modern art (Apinan, 1992). At the same time, Sarit's authoritarianism regime influenced the film in this period. As Hamilton (1994) explains, the filmmakers faced the most rigorous censorship ever and were prohibited from depicting the king, the military, the police and the bureaucracy in their movies.

## **2.2 Cultural Politics in the 1970s**

Thai art in the 1970s reflected a radical sense of politics. The phase is similar to many other countries' political movement in 1960s, whose cultures also influenced Thai art in this era.

### **2.2.1 Art for Life Movement in the 1970s**

The authoritarian regime of Sarit lasted until 1963 when the leader's death, and removal of his close associate and successor Field Marshall Thanom Kittikachorn by the mass demonstrations in October 1973 signaled the beginning of a new era. From the student uprising of October 1973 to October 1976, until the military regime expropriated them, lifted censorship and free intellectual atmosphere in time of liberalization had engendered prosperity of overt politically oriented arts.

Arts during this period were influenced by the works of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Zedong as well as Jit Phumisak, whose writings such as "Art for life" (1955) and "Art for the People"(1956-57) discussed the meaning of pure art, religious art, art for life's sake and art's sake (Apinan, 1992). Jit Phumisak was a charismatic leftist

intellectual writer/poet who was arrested as a communist after publishing his writings, and jailed for six years. In 1965, his actual participation in Communist Party Thailand activities led him to his death as he was killed by a local official in 1966. His books were published later in the 1970s, and became bibles for the artists in this period.

The art in the period directly reflected the political atmosphere. Pratuang Emjaroen was a leading artist in the era of politicized art during this time. Pratuang, a founder of the Dharma group, made a huge painting, “Dharma and Adharma” (or known as “Days of Disaster”) portraying the tragic sacrifices of 1973. Several other artists created work that pertained to particular political incidents, for example, Tang Chang’s “14 October.” In 1974, the Artists’ Front of Thailand was established to recalcitrant capitalist and imperialist arts, and cited the work of Mao Zedong and Jit Phumisak as key inspirations (Apinan, 1992). Before the 6<sup>th</sup> October coup in 1976, Dharma group organized their third exhibition at Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art, but after the incident, the artists burned their works to avoid the inspection and removal by the military regime, who thought their arts of the work of leftists (Apinan, 1992).

Other politically motivated artists such as Thammasak Booncherd portrayed rural farmers in “Thai Peasant” (1975), and skeleton soldiers with American flag and Asian people in “Imperialism” (1976). Sompot Upa-in who depicted scenes of exploitation in “People- Imperialism + Graduates = Zero” (1975) (Apinan, 1992). Later in 1979, former Artists’ Front members set up the Open Art Exhibition of Thailand, organized by artists and art teachers in various institutions who had thought the National Exhibition of Art had been unfairly monopolized by Silapakorn University’s Faculty of Painting and Sculpture. The exhibition was full of social satire and political expressions, including themes of human injustice, class discrimination, or the 1976 massacre. In the period after the student massacre and the revival of the military regime, many artists felt grief for what they had lost, and resentment towards the state and authoritarianism as Apinan Poshyananda (1992:172) explains,

The Open Art Exhibition of Thailand reached a wide audience, especially outside Bangkok. Many artists formed a group called the Thai Independent Artist Group. Viewers and artists had common link because at that time both were hypersensitive to issues of social injustice, elitist power, and corruption. Most important, the Open Art Exhibition of Thailand directly challenge the authoritative power of the national Exhibition of Art.

### 2.2.2 Songs for Life Movement in the 1970s

Other forms of art paralleled the developments in the visual arts movement. “Songs for life”, or *phleng pua chiwit* in Thai, focused on rural problems and social injustice, and was a product of student movements in 1970s as well. Many of the singers originally came from poor villages in rural area and migrated to Bangkok for higher education.

The most important and famous songs-for-life musical group is Caravan. Pamela Myers-Moro (1986:108) says, “Caravan’s music was a model of the experience of Thai progressive students”. Caravan was founded by two Northeast-born students, Surachai and Wirasak, who helped to mobilize the anti-dictatorship student movement at Ramkhamhaeng University in Bangkok. Later three more *Isan* (Northeast Thailand)-bred members were added. The name of Caravan was inspired by the anti-American book of the same title written by journalist Winai Ukrit, whose lyrics *Nok Si Luang* (Yellow Bird) would become Caravan’s most well-known and controversial song later. *Nok Si Luang* is a song honoring those who sacrificed their lives to overthrow the dictatorship that was in place until October 1973. The members of Caravan were strongly influenced by anti-Vietnam War US folksingers in the 1960s like Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and Joan Baez. It is a natural occurrence given that the “Thai Seventies Movement itself is not possible to think separately from Sixties Movement internationally” (Giles, 2007:70). Their songs were strongly political and some lyrics of their songs were adopted from poems of Jit Phumisak while others were written by group members or other student activists. They sympathized with Northeastern farmers, and one of their famous songs, *Khon kab Khwai* (Man and Water Buffalo) is quite clear on this point. The song is well known since it was the first expression of the politicized students' new perception of the farmers' life, the plight of the peasant and exploitation by capitalists.

There were more songs-for-life musical bands in this period such as Komchai, Kuruchon, and Ton kla rue. The songs of the bands appealed mostly to the dedicated, idealistic progressive students, particularly those at Thammasat University, and the students actually sang many of the songs especially associated with the Communist



movement itself (Myers-Moro, 1986). After the student massacre in 1976, many songs-for-life musicians, including Caravan members fled to the Northeast and joined the communist-led guerrillas in the jungle. By this time, singing of songs-for-life was officially prohibited and became a subject for punishment. Therefore, the major means of dissemination was through friends.

The Thai government declared amnesty in 1981, and many musicians came back to Bangkok from the forest at that time. In 1983, Caravan came together again in Bangkok, and continued creating music to promote democracy and social change. As a member of Caravan said, “All we want is a better life for the poor and the unfortunate --- that’s our ultimate goal” (Caravan in Lockard, 2001:198).

### 2.2.3 Films for Life<sup>1</sup> in the 1970s to Early 1980s

The 1970s also saw a similar flourishing of socially engaged films allegedly inspired by the socio-political conditions of the time. The films often drew inspiration from literature-for-life movement (*nangsue pua chiwit*) in the period. For example *Khao Chue Kan* (Dr. Karn, 1973) directed by Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol was written by Suwannee Sukontha, and *Khao Nok Na* (Half Breed, 1975), directed by Piac Poster, was written by See Fa. Additionally, two other major factors, the decline of 16mm filmmaking in the Thai film industry, and the influence of Western youth counterculture became a trigger for the emergence of socially engaged filmmakers, or the so-called “Thai new wave” (Anchalee, 2001). In the films in the 1970s to the 1980s, the filmmakers portrayed social issues facing women such as *Thepthida Rongraem* (Hotel Angel, Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol, 1974), *Thepthida Bar 21* (The Angel of Bar 21, Euthana Mukdasanit, 1978) or on issues for rural poor; such as *Luk Isan* (A Child of the Northeastern, Vichit Kounavudhi, 1982), *Khru Bannok* (The Rural Teacher, Surasee Patham, 1978), or focused on ethnic minorities such as *Khon Phukhao* (Mountain People, Vichit Kounavudhi, 1979), *Phisuea Lae Dokmai* (Butterfly And Flower, Euthana Mukdasanit, 1985), or social justice *Khao Chue Kan, Tongpan* (Tongpan, Euthana Mukdasanit and Surachai Jantimatorn, 1977), *Khru Somsri* (Teacher Somsri, Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol, 1986). Hamilton

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<sup>1</sup> Socially engaged films in this era will be discussed more in chapter V

(1994:149) comments, “These producers raised issues that never before had been canvassed in any form of mass media in Thailand and introduced the “marginal” into the mainstream of their works.” However the number of social-issue movies declined later for relatively non-political reasons; foreign film distributors stopped boycotting American films and imported videos began arriving in Thailand (Anchalee, 2001). In the 1990s, only M.C. Chatreechalerm Yukol, the director of *Khao Chue Kan*, continued to make socially engaged movies such as *Khon Liang Chang* (The Elephant Keeper, 1987), *Siadai 1* (Daughter 1, 1995), and *Siadai 2* (Daughter 2, 1996).

### **2.3 Cultural Politics from the Late 1970s to Early 1980s**

In the late 1970s to early 1980s, the Thai state initiated new bureaus focusing on identity and culture, including the National Culture Commission in the Ministry of Education in 1979 and the National Identity Board in the Office of Prime Minister in 1980 in order to establish new narratives broadening the scope of Thai identity and reintegration the notion of Thai ideological monarchy (Connors, 2006). Where the democratized movement of the 1970s questioned the stature of monarchy, the newly instituted National Identity Board promoted a new ideology of “democracy with the king as a head of state” through media or even popularized forms like stickers or posters (Connors, 2006). Since that point, the monarchy has been taken a highly important ideological position in the cultural politics of the country.

#### **2.3.1 Songs for Life since the 1980s**

With the development of the commercial industry in Thailand through the 1980s, the popular music scene changed accordingly. A new songs-for-life music band, Carabao, emerged in 1981 and became one of the most popular Thai musical groups by the mid-1980s. Their popularity remains undiminished. Carabao means buffalo in Filipino – the name is said to be inspired by the popular Caravan’s song *Khon Kab Khwai* (Man and Buffalo). The leaders of the band, Yuanyong Opakul (Ad) and Kirati Promsaka Na Sakon Nakhon (Khiao) formed Carabao in 1976 while studying in the Philippines, and debuted

the band in 1981 after coming back to Thailand. Their music includes folk elements, but has a stronger rock influence than that of Caravan (Lockard, 2001). Carabao's songs mainly focus on social and political issues such as the plight of Indochinese refugees, corruption, rural debt, drugs, the exploitation of women, the plight of prostitutes, and an unresponsive government. Whenever their music was banned for broadcast, sales of their music would spike. Their most popular album – which drew its title from their song, “Made in Thailand” – was released in 1984 and became a big hit, selling more than 3 million copies.

Craig Lockard (2001) argues that Carabao reached a much wider audience than Caravan because of their professionalism, pragmatism, considerably diluted protest style, and greater attention to romantic songs. Compared to Caravan, Carabao is less political and more accessible. As a result, Carabao was accepted by not only rural migrants to Bangkok but also the middle class, while Caravan had been criticized for doing the same old thing (Lockard, 2001). Even though some of Carabao's political songs were banned time to time, the popularity of the band demonstrates that they speak for their fans, both the middle class and the rural, and rural migrants to Bangkok (Lockard, 2001) in their criticisms of politicians and domestic and foreign capitalists who exploit the majority of Thais, the middle class and lower class.

After the economic crisis in 1997, however, Carabao seemed to have transformed its role into that of a defender of the Thai nation. In their nineteenth album *American An-tha-Phan* (American Bullies) of 1998, Ad, a main singer of the band, sarcastically sang that the superpower countries like the United States had intentionally drawn Thailand into debt through IMF loans (Chaiyuth, 2005). The song *Bangrajan Wan Phen* (Bangrajan at Full Moon) in the album *Siam Lor Tue* (The Siamese Pig) from the year 2000, was used for the commercially successful film *Bangrajan* (Bangrajan, Thanit Jintanukul, 2000). The film is about the story of several landmark battles between Thai villagers and Burmese invaders in 1767. Bangrajan is the name of a village in north of Ayutthaya, whose inhabitants bravely fought against the Burmese when the foreign troops came to plunder the capital of Ayutthaya. The film has been analyzed as nationalistic by scholars (Amporn, 2003; Lewis, 2003).<sup>2</sup> The film and corresponding

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<sup>2</sup> The film will be discussed in greater detail in chapter IV.

Carabao song was also used to advertise the Carabao energy drink (Sunait, 2006) – implying that the drink could give villagers energy to fight against the Burmese.

#### **2.4 Cultural Politics in the Late 1980s to 1990s**

In this period, Thai politics becomes increasingly split along business alliance or political factions, and Thainess reflected this fracturing beyond the control of state ideology. As the Culture Plan for 1994 to 1997 by the National Culture Commission mentions, “The state probably should not be the one to stipulate all cultural standards, since it is a basic freedom of the people to seek their own ways appropriate to their private circumstance” (National Culture Commission cited in Connors, 2006:531). Although the state still keeps the ideology of “democracy with the king as head of state”, the influence of the business field on the politics of Thai identity is quite noteworthy, as will be discussed in the case of the film industry in chapter IV.

The 1980s was also the period when the Thai economy experienced skyrocketing expansion. The emergence of a growing middle class was reflected in the films and music of this period – both were dominated by teenager culture, with a strong emphasis on music-video-esque aesthetics, bubblegum flicks and cute idol pop songs. Even though the films and songs in the time do not seem overtly political compared to those of the previous period, the rise of capitalism is clear in these art forms. With the exception of M.C. Chatreechalerm Yukol, who continued making social-critique films through the 1990s, mainstream cinema was taken over by teen flicks.

While songs-for-life bands including Carabao continue to speak out about emerging political issues, like environmental problems, wrought by commercial expansion of the country (Ubonrat, 1991), Carabao was able to maintain their popularity through the 1990s. But in general, the songs-for-life as a music genre was not as popular as before through the 1990s. Carabao, as explained above, draws on popularized, adopted rock-pop elements, including singing romance songs. Manond Apanich (2003) suggests that the participation of Ad Carabao in a Beer Chang campaign at that time was strategically used to promote products to rural and local people by presenting a songs-for-life sentiment. In other words, the songs-for-life movement was becoming commodified.

Business interests also asserted their pull on fine arts as well. Apinan explained corporations' attitude to art since the 1970s as "the purchase of art is seen as a status image of the all powerful wealthy as well as the continuation of free enterprise and the support of a capitalist economy" (Apinan, 1992:173). Concurrently economic growth, development, and urbanization of the capital city brought forth different issues for Thai society and Thai art, including environmental and health problems and anxiety over the perceived loss of traditional culture. This brought a kind of tension to Thai artist as Apinan (1992:191) confesses, "Many Thai artists believed that there should be a universal modern art that can be appreciated by all classes and nationalities. On the other hand, some artists felt obliged to maintain their sense of national unity and racial homogeneity. This dual purpose, trying to be international as well as expressing Thainess, has been extremely difficult for artists to reconcile"

At present, the force of globalization is becoming stronger and stronger, and Thai artists can hardly escape from its influence. Intentionally or unintentionally, and positively or negatively, their responses to the process of cultural and economic change are in their art. Even though contemporary arts are not as obviously politicized as Phibun's propaganda arts or the art-for-life movement, this study aims to analyze Thai cultural politics in the contemporary arts, especially using post-crisis Thai cinema as a case.

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## **CHAPTER III**

### **SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THAI CONTEMPORARY ARTS IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION**

This chapter discusses the concept of contemporary arts and artists in this study. The discussion in this chapter is not whether popular culture is popular art or not, but why it is necessary to include movie directors, comedians, novelists, cartoonists under the rubric of emerging contemporary artists. In other words, the chapter aims to look at new concept of art in Thailand. The section examines the backdrop of the recent contemporary arts situation to support the analysis of contemporary arts in this thesis, that is, the new emergent artists struggle against the notion of art both in and out of Thailand. The first section reviews Thai boom of indie, independent culture, based on the concept of DIY (Do It Yourself), which questions commercial-based mainstream popular culture/arts including music and film. Secondly, this study examines the ambiguity of Thai contemporary arts through the emergence of multi-talented artists who challenge conventional notion of art. The newly emerging artists in this study practice more than one art form, and it consequently objects to conventional Thai exclusive understanding of art. At the same time, the artists aesthetically seek new experimental artistic styles and challenge in the art world, which, as a result, makes the artists themselves known in international arena. The chapter identifies globalization as a significant factor to bring about the phenomenon because the artists and appreciators of their art are directly or indirectly influenced by global culture through overseas education, internet, cable television or digitalized arts.

### 3.1 Indie<sup>1</sup> Boom in Thailand

#### 3.1.1 Definition of Indie

Indie is an abbreviation of independent, and usually implies independent from the mainstream. Indie culture is “most often associated with a subculture defined by its associated music, fashion, behavior and beliefs, and it is an avant-garde lifestyle which follows social trends that are considered to consciously deviate from the mainstream, and one common belief within indie culture is anti-conformity.”(Wikipedia, 2006) Indie traditionally denotes independent arts including music, film, literature or other cultural products, that are created outside of the mainstream and without corporate financing (Andrews, 2006). The term originally appeared in popular music discourse on British popular music, which then expanded to the United States and elsewhere under the category “alternative rock” (Hesmondhalgh, 1999). The term “indie” emerged from the post-punk environment in Britain in the 1980s as “a new phase in the cultural politics of alternative pop/rock in Britain” characterized with “jangly guitars, an emphasis on cleaver and/or sensitive lyrics inherited from the singer/songwriter tradition in rock and pop, and minimal focus on rhythm track” (Hesmondhalgh, 1999:38).

Although the word “indie” itself did not originate in Thai language, it has been a momentous movement in Thai cultural scene for some years, covering a wide range of popular culture, including music, art, film, and fashion. The influence is apparent in the Thai language as Thai youth who appreciate indie culture are now known as *dek neaw indie*, literally neo-indie kids. Record companies like Small Room and Bakery emerged as pioneers in the indie music scene, which is very popular among young people. In Siam Square, a key shopping district for Thai youth near Chulalongkorn University, record shops selling indie music CDs or DVDs soon emerged in tandem with the rise of the indie phenomenon. The FAT radio station played indie tunes and became central in the movement. The annual indie music festival organized by the radio station has become one of the most sizable and influential music festivals in Thailand (Photo 3.1 and Photo 3.2).

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes “indie” is spelled “indy” in some magazines or articles but in this thesis, indie, the one more frequently used in media and appeared in dictionaries as well, is adopted.

Besides the music scene, an organization called Thaiindie, a group of Thai independent filmmakers, was established by a leading independent filmmaker Thunskapansittivorakul, and the group has actively screened and promoted the group's works in both domestic and international film festivals. A fashionable youth culture magazine "a day" is teeming with indie information, and Chatuchak Weekend market became a first stop for young fashion designers selling their creative products. Ohn of ska-punk group Adulterer defines a *dek naew indie* as "a person who reads 'a day', listens to Fat, watches short films, and shops at Chatuchak Weekend Market"(Ohn in Cornwel-Smith, 2005:248).

However, the term indie does not necessarily mean the same thing in the East as it does in the West and the term is recently developed to explain certain cultural movements, not strictly alternative-rock music styles. Nevertheless, Thai indie drew on British influences, especially in the beginning. DJs Wasana and Bee<sup>2</sup> broadcasted British indie music (Cornwel-Smith, 2005), and the most successful and celebrated indie music band, Modern Dog, started their career with a heavily alternative-rock based sound.

Meanwhile, in Japan, cultural publications started to become aware of the indie movement in Bangkok in the early 2000s, even though they never used the term indie<sup>3</sup>, but called it "Bangkok Culture" or "Siamese."<sup>4</sup> The term "Bangkok culture" and "Siamese" are both based on the location of cultural scene. Siamese here does not refer to Siam as the previous national name of Thailand, but it indicates the Siam area in Bangkok and the shopping area Siam Square, the center of Thai youth culture. Magazines such as Studio Voice (2003), Eyescream (2004), Esquire Japan (2004), all well-known popular culture magazines, have introduced various aspects of the subculture in Bangkok, including music, film, literature, fashion, and art, which is almost equal to what Thai youth call indie. All the magazines above express the common sentiment that the movement is evolving rapidly, that is, Bangkok holds the potential to become another

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<sup>2</sup> Bee is presently a member of music band futon, an influential indie music group.

<sup>3</sup> It is probably attributed to the word indie in Japanese has different connotation from indie in Thailand. The term indies (Japanese uses a plural form pronouncing "indiizu") means mainly indie music scene, where mostly wannabe musicians accustomed themselves to the stages and get attention from the mainstream companies.

<sup>4</sup> "bankoku karuchaa" and "saiamu teki" in Japanese



popular cultural city such as New York, London or Tokyo.

One of the characteristics among leading artists in the indie culture, according to these Japanese magazines, is their educational background. They have earned bachelors' or masters' degree in Western countries, and came back to Thailand after the 1997 financial crisis. Artists in these categories include Prabda Yoon, Apichatpong Weelasethakul and Wit Pimkahchanapong.

Another characteristic of the movement is, these Japanese magazines say, its international atmosphere. Some pre-eminent indie artists are not Thai nationals but hail from Western countries or Japan. One example is the group Futon, an electro-punk music band composed of two Thai, and two English<sup>5</sup>. Bee, one of the members, introduced British indie music into Thailand as a radio disc jockey. For these reasons, the name Bangkok Culture seems apt, as Bangkok is the centralized, developed, and international capital, which serves as a business center in Southeast Asia and a tourist destination.



Photo 3.1 Fat Festival in 2006 at IMPACT, Nonthaburi.

Independent companies and individual artists sell their works (CDs, DVDs, magazines, books etc) in the same compartment to stages. This space was designed by Thai visual artist Wit Pimkanchanapong. Source: Photograph taken by the author in 2006

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<sup>5</sup> Recently two members left and new members joined in Futon. When the Japanese magazines published Bangkok culture issues, Futon comprised one Thai, one Japanese and two English.



Photo 3.2 Fat Festival in 2006 at IMPACT, Nonthaburi.

Musicians from independent music companies perform in stage.

Source: Photograph taken by the author in 2006

### 3.1.2 Indie as Do It Yourself Culture

An important aspect of general indie culture is its anti-conformity position and it is visible in the Thai indie cultural scene as well.

Manond Apanich's study (2003) shows the rise of Thai indie musicians is attributed to DIY, do it yourself, sentiment.<sup>6</sup> DIY culture is also a Western-originated term describing the late 1970s punk movement drawing on anti-establishment sentiment, individualism and nihilism (Apanich, 2003). In the case of Thailand, Thai popular music was dominated by singers who emphasized their pretty, mainstream appearance through the 1980s to 1990s, but the emergence of indie bands such as Sepia and Modern Dog let Thai youths realize that they can "create something new themselves", which is the focal point of DIY aesthetics. (Apanich, 2003)

#### 3.1.2.1 Thai "New Wave" Filmmakers since 1997

Thai cinema industry faced a watershed moment in 1997 (Lewis, 2003; Anchalee, 2004d). Coincidentally this was the same year when Thai economy and politics went

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<sup>6</sup> Apanich (2003) calls them underground musicians.

through a significant turning point, a major financial crisis and the promulgation of a new Constitution. Similar to the music industry, Thai cinema in the mid-1980s and most of 1990s abounded with bubble-gum flicks for teenagers, which means that cute and pretty adolescent culture was the mainstream for both music and film about a decade. The emergence of new types of filmmakers such as Nonzee Nimibutr and Pen-ek Rattananarung from the advertising industry in 1997 is noteworthy for the resurrection of Thai cinema. The directors were welcomed by movie lovers who had become weary of teen-oriented music-video-esque flicks dominating the industry, similarly to the fact that indie music label Bakery, which had signed Modern Dog, was received warmly by Thai youth.

Apparently the popularity of present Thai cinema in both domestic and international market has contributed to this revival of Thai cinema as the so-called “New Wave” filmmakers were strongly appreciated by international cineastes. Nonzee and Pen-ek are presently playing a main role in Thai film industry, and some directors who have come out after them have been prosperous as well. Coming from the same advertising company as Pen-ek, Wisit Sasanatieng is the first Thai filmmaker who went to the Cannes film festival, France. Nonzee and Wisit are both visual communication students from Silpakorn University, the oldest institute for art education in Bangkok, and Wisit has written a script for Nonzee’s gangster film *2499Anthaphan Khrong Mueang* (Dang Bireley's and Young Gangsters, 1997) and ghost film *Nang Nak* (Nang Nak, 1999). Nonzee is an active as a film producer, and he has supported Pen-ek’s *Monrak Transistor* (Monrak Transistor, 2001) and Wisit’s *Fa Thalai Chon* (Tears of Black Tiger, 2000) while Pen-ek narrates in the second film of Wisit, *Ma Nakhon* (Citizen Dog, 2004). These collaborative works of three new auteurs from the advertising world demonstrate their closeness both artistically and likely personally.

DIY aesthetics seems to live in the heart of the filmmaker, as Pen-ek confesses in an interview with a Japanese magazine,

Actually some people asked me to shoot Hollywood movie but I don’t find it interesting. In a highly competitive environment like Hollywood, I guess I cannot do what I really want to do. (Pen-ek in Studio Voice, 2003)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Interview in Studio Voice (2004). Translated by author of this thesis.

Hollywood is widely accepted as the center of the film industry worldwide. Pen-ek's statement implies an allegiance to DIY aesthetics, he chooses to shoot what he desires with a smaller budget (compared to Hollywood filmmaking) rather than making mainstream films.

### 3.1.2.2 Thai Short Film and Video Festival

This emergence of new wave filmmakers is not the only factor to the current trend of Thai independent cinema. Another important influence on present film culture in the country is the Thai Short Film and Video Festival, which began in 1997. Making and watching short films became a trend for indie lovers and even became defining characteristics of a *dek naew indie* (Cornwel-Smith, 2005). The organization "Thaishortfilm" sells short film works at its website and at the Chatuchak Weekend Market, the favored shopping spot for indie kids.<sup>8</sup>

A most celebrated Thai independent filmmaker, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, another regular visitor to notable international festivals such as Venice and Cannes lauds the short film festival,

I think among festival organizers, filmmakers and audience, we all know that this maybe the most important festival in our country. If compare the budget, it maybe list the dust of another big festival which doesn't contribute anything to us. I think this is the need to have this festival. I would like to thank the festival because I started from a filmmaker to be the jury of the festival. Like we grew up together in the past ten years (Apichatpong in Thai Film Foundation, 2006b:9).

The festival organizer, the Thai Film Foundation accepted short films by any filmmakers including those directed by students, amateurs or young filmmakers, and selects superior works to screen every year. Over the years, the festival has produced talented filmmakers like Pakpoom Wongpoom, a director of *Shutter Kot Tit Winyan* (*Shutter*, Bunjong Pisunthanagoon and Pakpoom Wongpoom, 2004), who started his career from the festival.

The festival not only offers a venue for independent filmmakers and film

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<sup>8</sup> [www.thaishortfilm.com](http://www.thaishortfilm.com), The shop in Chatuchak Weekend Market closed down in 2007, but purchasing indie films is possible through the website.

enthusiasts to screen and watch short films, but also provides educational opportunities for aspiring filmmakers. The tenth Thai short film and video festival in 2006 had a unique program dedicated to documentary filmmaking, for example, the foundation invited a Japanese veteran documentary filmmaker, Makoto Sato, and held a workshop for Thai filmmakers. With its educational programs and audience and indie filmmakers focus, the festival is different from commercially oriented film festivals, and has become a symbol of indie film culture and DIY aesthetics.

Absence of censorship is another significant aspect of the festival. As a first step for student filmmakers or young penniless directors, the festival has welcomed movies with sensitive issues or experimental styles, which are usually not accepted by the mainstream film industry. The contribution of a film screening space for alternatives films (but not an uncritical one, as the festival has a selection and competition process) has satisfied the political and aesthetic hunger of many young filmmakers.

### **3.1.2.3 Technology**

New information technology developments have helped fuel the popularity of DIY culture. Many short films submitted to the festival were shot by a digital video camera, enabling filmmakers to make DVDs of their work easily and distribute or even sell it. As Tim, an American music producer in Bangkok, says,

Around the period of the bubble economy collapse, internet technology and cable TV spread and it was one of the big impacts to Thai cultural scene. The easy access to the tool to express themselves probably has made DIY culture more casual, and enhanced indie culture. (Tim in Eyescream, 2004:34-35)<sup>9</sup>

Borderless communications through internet and cable television give these digital-aged children to effortless access to music, film, or cultural information around the world.

### **3.1.2.4 Commodification**

DIY culture and indie sentiment seem like possible responses to mainstream and capitalistic culture, as indie works appear to put more importance on expression, rather

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<sup>9</sup> Translated by author of this thesis.

than earnings. Apanich (2003) analyzed the Thai underground music, which this study calls indie, as subculture and suggested that the more subculture gains popularity the more popular culture is likely to use subculture for profit, based on theoretical works of Dick Hebdige (1979) and David Muggleton (2000). In fact, gigantic major record companies like Grammy owns indie label<sup>10</sup>. Corporate marketers find what Thai youth is pleased by, and pays for. Yuthana Ted Boonorm of Fat radio station explained that indie music in the mid-1990s was all about being different, strange and straying from the mainstream, but then alternative and DIY soon became the fashion, and a part of the mainstream after big record company at the end (Apanich, 2003). Similar tendency is observable in Thai indie film as well.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.1.2.5 Generation

One difference found between leading indie artists and their followers is their age. Those who initiate and create indie culture are presently around their mid-twenties to forties, with most of them being in their thirties, while their enthusiasts are in their early-twenties or teenagers. The artists grew up during Thailand's rapid industrial development, which also saw an expansion of the middle class. As many of the leading artists had studied abroad in the United States or Europe for their undergraduate or graduate studies, they probably came from relatively well-to-do families.

On the other hand, indie children are from a different generation, Generation Y. Generation Y is an American term, but is applicable to many countries. A member of Generation Y was born between 1981 to 2002 and was raised in a digital society (Saransri, 2006). In the case of Thailand, Generation Y has grown up with "indie" in music, film, art, and literature, and they are better-educated, book-smart, and know more things on a broader scale, but are impatient, unwilling to commit responsibility, and superficial according to Saransri (2006). The preferences for individualism and freedom likely ascribed to the indie boom among members of this generation.

Exposed to indie culture and digital tools, Generation Y inherently holds DIY aesthetics, but they are not necessarily counterculture practitioners, that is, indie culture

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<sup>10</sup> GMM Grammy owns Sanamluang indie music label.

<sup>11</sup> See chapter V for more detail.

as subculture is no longer subordinate in opposing hegemonic mainstream culture. At the same time members of Generation Y oppose traditions, as seen in their dislike working from 9 to 5 and in their preference to be a freelance work (Saransri, 2006). Generation Y is unlikely to consider what the previous generation has thought a hegemony as hegemonic.

## **3.2 Blurring the Distinction between Art and Popular Culture**

### **3.2.1 Emergence of Multi-talented Artists**

The term “*silapa*” or art is originally applied to fine art in Thailand, but since contemporary art has adopted various methods such as new media art, digital art, or pop art, the definition of art has become blurred and so has the notion of the artist. This is not a specifically Thai phenomenon but is likely taking place all over the world, and was brought to Thailand through the globalization. One aspect of localization or hybridization of global culture is the emergence of Thai artists who practice both so-called “art” and “popular culture”, and also obscures the distinction between contemporary art and popular culture. At the same time, they bring experimental or avant-garde styles into Thai contemporary art scene, and make Thai arts noticeable in the international stage. Many of these artists in Thai contemporary art scene have studied abroad in Western or Japanese institutions and returned to Thailand, including those introduced below, who are widely acknowledged among Thai indie generation.

#### **3.2.1.1 Prabda Yoon**

Prabda Yoon is a well known writer primarily known as the young winner of the SEA Write award, or Southeast Asian Writers award, the prestigious award given to writers from countries that are part of the ASEAN. Prabda’s writings are often described as a typical example of postmodern literature for the use of word play, and deconstruction of conventions of Thai literature (Udo, 2007). Consequently there has been criticism against his writing, the Thai newspaper *Siam Rath* declared his victory is the “tragedy of

the SEA Write Award” (Vierne, 2007). Meanwhile veteran writer Sujit Wongthes expressed his support to newly emergent writers like Prabda and welcomed them to Thai literature circles (Vierne, 2007). However what made his name internationally known was probably his scripts for successful films like, *Rueang Rak Noi Nit Mahasan (Last Life in the Universe, 2003)* and *Khamphiphaksa Khong Mahasamut (Invisible Waves, 2006)* directed by Pen-ek Ratanaruang, who is one of the most widely known Thai film auteurs.

Besides being a charismatic writer, Prabda is also known as a musician in a group called “Buahima”, which signed under the independent music label “Small Room”. As a member of “Buahima”, he made a music album as a soundtrack for his novel, just like a movie has a soundtrack. Such backgrounds like postmodern literature works and new concept of music soundtrack for his writing, brought a fresh and new style into Thai cultural arena, and made him a charismatic figure among Thai indie youngsters.

He had studied in the United States from the age of 14, and came back to Thailand in 1997 after finishing his study of art at the prestigious art-education institution, Cooper Union in New York. His background of art education helps his career in art world as well. In 2004, he became a curator for Japan-Foundation-supported “Have we met?” exhibition in Tokyo, which focused on contemporary arts from India, Indonesia, Japan and Thailand.

In addition to working as a writer, musician and curator, Prabda is also known as a painter, photographer, and magazine editor. Japanese magazines regard him as a leading figure in the emerging cultural scene in Thailand.

### **3.2.1.2 Udom Taephanich**

Udom Taephanich is best-known as a comedian or performer of his original *diaw*-microphone, or stand-up comedy style. Udom made his debut as a member of a comedy group in 1993, and then started a series of one-microphone performances as first stand-up comedian in Thailand since 1995. This one-microphone performance has been victorious enough to let his name known among Thai people. He debuted as an actor in *Klong (Box, 1998)*, directed by prominent director M.C. Chatrichalerm Yukol, and has



been in three films by the time of this writing. Moreover his writing is popular as the number of his essays number more than 10, some of them are also translated into Japanese. A published drawing series and numerous his art exhibitions, reveal his talent as a visual artist as well. His art exhibitions include “Laxative” or *yaa rabaay* (1999), “Note Udom on Canvas” (2000), “Voodoo Gu do”(2001), and “Documentary” (2006) and he also joined Yokohama International Triennale of Contemporary Art in 2005 as a member of SOI Project, a group of Thai and Japanese artists.

His talent in different media sometimes becomes a target of criticism. He expresses his preference to work in many different media and avoid any perceived segregation between different art forms, which SOI project enables him to do, in a Japan Foundation interview,

In Thai art world, artists are categorized by genre like that a painter is a painter, a poet is a poet, a musician is a musician, and a filmmaker is a filmmaker. Everyone works differently and there is little chance to stimulate and spark each other, and heighten its creativity. I am sorry for that. For example, I am a writer and painter but literature circles says my book is not a novel while art circles criticizes mine is not a painting. It seems that an art genre is completely categorized in Thailand, and if I do not belong to the circle, I have no right to express in the art form. I think that is a pity. On the other hand, SOI Project does not have this strain, and the easiness suits me much. (Udom in Yoshioka, 2005)<sup>12</sup>

Not only has he enjoyed success as a pioneering stand-up comedy performer but also an actor, writer, and painter present his artistic talent in various art forms. It consequently makes the concept of art and popular culture blurred. At the same time, his remarks in the interview sharply exposes the multi-talented artists are actually opposing to the traditional idea on art in Thailand.

### 3.2.1.3 Wisut Ponnimit

Wisut Ponnimit is probably the most famous Thai artist in Japan at this moment. A graduate of the Decorative Art Department of Silpakorn University, he debuted as a cartoonist in a magazine called “katch” in 1998. Renowned as an original style cartoonist, his cartoons were well received in Japan, a country well-known for its cartoon or *manga*,

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Udom Taephanich by Norihiko Yoshioka, a staff of Japan Foundation. Translated by author of this thesis.

while his popularity rose in his home country as well. Simple and peculiar drawings coupled with heartwarming storylines somehow deconstruct the standard style of Japanese-style cartoon and attract young arty readers in both countries. He has published ten volumes of his famous series “hesheit” in Thai, and Japanese publisher compiled selected works from 1998 to 2003 into one Japanese-language volume in 2004. Another comic series, “everybodyeverything” highlights his heartwarming narrative, which appeals to a wide Japanese readership, and made him well known in Japan. Wisut was born in 1976, whose generation directly enjoyed cultural flow of Japanese-style comic in Thailand (Aoyama, 2006), and naturally he was influenced by many Japanese cartoonists in his childhood, which finally made him study the language of the country where his favorite cartoons came from, simply because he “wants to read Japanese comics in the original language”(Wisut in Eyescream, 2004:50)<sup>13</sup>

His drawing style, however, is not a typical Japanese comic style. His drawings of “hesheit” series, for instance, have been made intentionally rough like a school kids’ scribble on notebook. Wisut explains, “When an idea comes into my mind, I want to see it as soon as possible. If I try to draw it beautifully, then it takes time and the drawing loses a sense of speed. Although my drawing looks unskilled, but that is natural for me, and even I think it encourages reader’s imagination.”(Eyescream, 2004 :50)<sup>14</sup>. He also mentioned on his drawing style, “I don’t like stereotype. I thought the story of “hesheit” had a good message therefore my rough drawings were fine. But now people think rough drawing style is my style, and I do not like it. I have been thinking that the importance is the content but not a drawing technique. But rough drawing style becomes fashionable and stylish, and I wanted to change the image and do something different.” (Hobo Nikkan Itoi Shinbun, 2006).<sup>15</sup> This idea produced his next series “everythingeverybody”, which holds a different drawing style from the former “hesheit” series. His intentional and deconstructing cartooning style has brought novelty in the two countries, and even make his drawings “art”.

Wisut’s official website calls his work “art” comics, which demonstrates how he does not consider his work to be typical of other cartoon works, or conventional

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<sup>13</sup> Translated by author of this thesis.

<sup>14</sup> Translated by author of this thesis.

<sup>15</sup> Translated by author of this thesis.

understanding of comic books. Wisut does not say that he challenges the conventional concept of cartoon, but rather he often refers to his respect to Japanese cartoon masters. However his intentions on artistic drawing style sharply reveals his spirit of experimentalism. Naturally, Wisut exhibited his works. In 2005 he opened the “*melo*” or “Labyrinth” experimental exhibition in Osaka, where visitors could look at his drawings by using flashlights in the dark labyrinth. Wisut also participated in Yokohama International Triennale of Contemporary Art in 2005 as a member of SOI Project together with Udom and other members of art / popular culture practitioners. His drawing is placed between cartoon and art.

Besides being a cartoonist, Wisut creates animation movies based on his cartoon series and screens them as a part of live performance, that is, he plays the piano while screening his animation in front of an audience. The music he plays matches to the moves in his animation. This new style of music and animation screening performance attracts Japanese young people and he is known widely among culturally sensitive Japanese youth. Wisut also professionally plays drum in a Thai independent music label “Small Room”, where Prabda made music soundtrack for his book. In fact, Prabda and Wisut are close to each other.

Wisut’s position between cartoon and art, or animation and video art, together with his musical talent reveals unclear distinction between art and popular culture as well as his multiple talents. Furthermore experimental styles of Wisut, probably unintentionally but consequently question a notion of mainstream cartoon and animation screening (or music performance), which actually attract spectatorship in both Thailand and Japan.

#### **3.2.1.4 Apichatpong Weerasetakul**

The works of Thai new film auteur Apichatpong Weerasetakul are often regarded as artistic film works rather than entertainment flicks. This graduate of the Architecture Department of Khon Kaen University went on to earn a Master at the Art Institute of Chicago, and local Thais often argue that his works are too experimental and difficult to understand. His background of art education seems to help him as a filmmaker. In an

interview, Apichatpong answers to the question how his architectural background has to do with his films,

Everything is about films. Architecture has its story. It's just another way to tell a story, like someone who approaches art through space and time. It is a walk from one point to another which is very similar to films. Light, shadow and space are about feelings and mind. It's like human. Every one has his or her story. Association with different kind of people can have varied reactions. Going to different places therefore stimulates different feelings or atmospheres. With the earlier works, I was experiencing this medium (films) about what they could do. So I create a new structure. It was structurally outstanding. (Apichatpong in s.i.am contemp, n.d.:17)

He continues to the question whether it is “deconstruction”,

Kind of. Deconstruction is about distorting volume, mass, light and shadow without clinging to the same old rules. If a building is like a square box, can we make it into another shape? Films are just like that. What if they don't follow the Hollywood rules? Could we use the rules of our hearts? That way, films are more individual. Architecture serves people who use it everyday, but films are about a specific time of each individual. They are more likely a reflection of the filmmakers, rather than a functional object for the receivers. (Apichatpong in s.i.am contemp, n.d.:17)

Although Apichatpong makes a difference between architecture and film by individuality but his answer reveals that his approach toward arts, which he calls “a walk from one point to another” are comparable between architecture and film. Moreover, his remarks slightly show his attitude towards filmmaking. Obviously his works are different from Hollywood style, which dominates the mainstream film industry. Many of his earlier short films are experimental and avant-garde as he says the education at the Art Institute of Chicago affected his style (May Adadol and MacDonald, 2006). Unconventional filmic style in his works often becomes the talk of film circles, such as, appearance of titles and credits in the middle of the film in *Sut Saneha* (Blissfully Yours, 2002), more-than-one-minute black dark scene in the middle of the story in *Sat Pralat* (Tropical Malady, 2004) or usage of non-actors in *Dokfa Nai Mue Man* (Mysterious Object at Noon, 2000), *Sut Saneha*, and *Sat Pralat*. Such experimental and unconventional artistic approaches are one reason he is well recognized in the international stage.

Furthermore, Apichatpong claims his position as a conceiver of his film, not a director.

I think my films are basically concepts. I conceived them; the rest is a collaboration process where the films grow. "Directed by" is too strong a word. But I got asked this question a lot, so in *Syndromes*<sup>16</sup>, I changed to "Directed by" to simplify life a bit. (Apichatpong in Lee, 2007)

His attitude toward a film is probably different from many other conventional filmmakers. At the same time, his charismatic popularity in Thai independent cinema, in spite of his unpopularity among Thai general film audience, inspires some like-minded filmmakers. Recently an independent filmmaker Pimpaka Towira, who also knows Apichatpong personally, uses “conceived by” instead of “directed by” for her feature length documentary film, *The Truth Be Told* (*The Truth Be Told*, 2007).

All Apichatpong’s feature length films have screened and some have received honorable prizes at the film festivals outside Thailand (Table 3.1). Apichatpong’s cinema is mostly appreciated in those countries while his films do not enjoy successful runs in home country. In spite of his considerable popularity in those countries, his name is little known among Thais, except those in the film field and passionate indie film fans.

Apichatpong’s artistic talent goes beyond the framework of cinema. Together with Thai visual artist Wit Pimkanchanapong and Japanese architect Jiro Endo<sup>17</sup>, Apichatpong joined the independent music label Bakery’s concert stage project, tenth anniversary celebration at the Rajamangala National Stadium in Bangkok. Moreover, his short films or video are often used as installation form for art exhibitions, for example, *It is Possible That only Your Heart is Not Enough to Find You a True Love* (*It is Possible That only Your Heart is Not Enough to Find You a True Love*, 2004) at Busan Biennale in Korea (2004), *Faith* (*Faith*, 2006) at Liverpool Biennale in UK (2006), or *Unknown Forces* (*Unknown Forces*, 2007) at Roy and Edna Disney/Calarts Theater in Los Angeles (2007).

The films Apichatpong Weerasethakul has made are often regarded as an art film and it seems to root in his artistic/filmic style and art-educational background, which is also observable in his active production of video art and installation work. Apichatpong,

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<sup>16</sup> Syndrome is “*Saeng Satawat (Syndromes and Century*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2006)”

<sup>17</sup> Wit Pimkanchanapong and Jiro Endo are in SOI project. See details in later section of this chapter.

not only makes the distinction between cinema and video art ambiguous but also challenges film conventions by using experimental expressions in the middle of film, starring amateurs, or exposing his stance on filmmaking with credit “conceived by” instead of “directed by”.

| <b>Title</b>   | <b>Prize</b>  | <b>Film Festival</b>                                    | <b>Year</b> |
|--|---|---|-------------|
| <i>Dokfa Nai Mue Man</i><br>(Mysterious Object at Noon, 2000)            | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Prize, NETPAC Special Mention Prize | Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, Japan | 2001        |
|  | Grand Prix – Woosuk Award                           | JeonJu Film Festival, Korea                             | 2001        |
|  | Special Citation “Dragons & Tigers”                 | Vancouver International Film Festival, Canada           | 2000        |
| <i>Sut Saneha</i> ( <u>Blissfully Yours</u> , 2002)                      | Le Prix Un Certain Regard                           | Cannes Film Festival, France                            | 2002        |
|  | Golden Alexander Award – Best Film                  | Thessaloniki Film Festival, Greece                      | 2002        |
|  | Grand Prize   | Tokyo Filmex, Japan                                     | 2002        |
|  | The Circle of Dutch Film Critics Award              | Rotterdam International Film Festival, Netherlands      | 2003        |
|  | The International Critics Award (FIPRESCI Prize)    | Buenos Aires Film Festival, Argentine                   | 2003        |
|  | Silver Screen Award: Young Cinema Award             | Singapore International Film Festival, Singapore        | 2003        |
|  | Best International Film                             | Images Festival, Canada                                 | 2003        |
| <i>Huachai Thon Nong</i><br>( <u>The Adventure of Iron Pussy</u> , 2003) | Official Selection                                  | Berlin Film Festival, Germany                           | 2004        |
| <i>Sat Pralat</i><br>( <u>Tropical Malady</u> , 2004)                    | Prix du Jury  | Cannes Film Festival, France                            | 2004        |
|  | Age d’or Prize                                      | Cine’de’couertes, Belgium                               | 2004        |
|  | Grand Prize   | Tokyo Filmex, Japan                                     | 2004        |
|  | Best Film, Special Jury Prize                       | The xx International Gay & Lesbian Film Festival, Italy | 2005        |
|  | Special Jury Prize                                  | Singapore International Film Festival, Singapore        | 2005        |
| <i>Saeng Satawat</i><br>( <u>Syndromes and a Century</u> , 2006)         | Official Competition                                | Venice Film Festival, Italy                             | 2006        |

Table 3.1 Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s feature length films and major prizes.  
Source: Created by author of this thesis based on Kick the Machine website.

### 3.2.1.5 Pen-ek Ratanaruang and Nonzee Nimibutr

Other so-called “New Wave” filmmakers also blur the conventional concept of art. For example, Pen-ek Ratanaruang’s short film, *Total Bangkok* (Total Bangkok, 2006) and Nonzee Nimibutr’s *The Ceiling* (The Ceiling, 2005) were screened at “A Wave of Passion” exhibition, Teo-Namfah gallery (2007) as a part of art works. It seems that the

distinction between short art film and video art is becoming unclear.

All three filmmakers addressed in this chapter received art training at the prestigious educational institutions including the Art Institute of Chicago (Apichatpong), Pratt Institute in New York (Pen-ek), and Silpakorn University in Bangkok (Nonzee).

### 3.2.1.6 SOI Project

Thai independent music groups such as “Modern Dog”, “Penguin Villa” and “Futon” participated in SOI Project at Yokohama International Triennale of Contemporary Art in 2005 as musical performers. The director of the project, visual artist Wit Pimkanchanapong, explains the background and concept of the SOI Project,

For the past five years, the emergence of non-mainstream music scene in Thailand has been gathering an overwhelming momentum. It has been triggered by the rising interest in the eclectic mixtures of live music, audio-visual performances, and short films and music video competitions. Meanwhile, it has coincidentally provided a new open-ended space for the like-minds with profound passions in arts, films, photography, new media, literature, fashion, design and architecture to come together and create a new, thriving community. By leaping into a wider context other than the usual visual art realm, these interdisciplinary practices have been slowly reaching out to a bigger range of audiences. .... Designed specifically for Yokohama 2005, SOI Project is a laboratory-like unit that will showcase the collaborations between artists and those within the circle of contemporary non-mainstream culture in Thailand. The project assembles artists from diverse backgrounds and practices. All the artists will strive to reach a new plane of creative height via eclectic collaborations. The process and results are expected to be experimental and spontaneous. The selected artists will work with musicians from both Thailand and Japan. The collaborating frameworks will open up a new arena for artists and participants as it will possess no boundaries. The artists are granted an absolute autonomy where they can blend their works of arts directly with musical performances so that they can fine tune the two platforms together. The artists can collaborate without any restrictions and are free to invite other professionals to be involved in their works as well. These procedures will aim to spark and regenerate the new kinds of artistic kinetics and cultural synergies. The platform is simply based on the shared creativity, and responds directly to the idea of “Sanook” , a multi-faceted, intrinsic ideology of good ole Thai “fun” . (Wit, 2005)

At first, SOI Project began as the SOI Music Festival, organized by a group of Thai and Japanese independent musicians and their enthusiasts. The project then expanded into different forms of arts and popular culture, involving those who share the idea towards arts, “non-mainstream” in Wit’s words, and eventually became an expansive enough cultural project to participate in various international art festivals. SOI Project, in addition to Yokohama, has contributed to “Temporary Art Museum SOI Sabai” (2006) in Bangkok

(Photo 3.3 and Photo 3.4), exhibition at “Mairie de 6e” at Paris (2006), “Sharjah Biennial 2007” in the United Arab Emirates and “Show me Thai” at MOT Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo (2007). What integrate the SOI participants as a group, as Wit declares, are shared artistry and the feeling of joyfulness. As the name shows its member structure is not fixed and changeable depending on an occasion and project, except some core members. As Udom pointed out above, the stance of SOI project conflicts with the conventional Thai concept of art, exclusive on its artistic genre. The attitude of collaborations over different art forms in SOI project, not only blurs the distinction between art and popular culture, but also challenges the traditional concept of art. The ideology of inclusive arts by new contemporary creators is, in a sense, resistant to old exclusivist idea toward arts.



Photo 3.3: Temporary Art Museum SOI Sabai exhibition in 2006.

A Japanese contemporary artist Yoshitomo Nara joined in SOI project and exhibited his artworks.

Source: Photograph taken by author in 2006.





Photo 3.3: Temporary Art Museum SOI Sabai exhibition in 2006.

Apichatpong Weelasethakul also joined in SOI project. His short work *Ghost and Asia* (*Ghost and Asia*, 2005) was screened in an independent room where audience can sit down and even lie down on floor. The room had a TV, a DVD player and an electric fan.

Source: Photograph taken by author in 2006.

### 3.2.2 Challenges to Conventional Notion of Art

In his study of contemporary Thai art, Pandit Chanrochanakit (2006:77) examined the work of “a new type of Thai artists” who challenges both the Western gaze and the Thai gaze as practitioners of “transversal art” whose “artistic practices associated with hybrid culture”. In following chapters, the two artists examined in Pandit’s dissertation, namely Navin Rawanchaikul and Michael Shaowanasai, will be addressed in order to support my arguments about artistic challenges against Thai hegemony. However in this section, artists who also search a new art style and consequently blurs the conventional notion of art, are introduced. As Pandit (2006) defines them, as opponents to the neo-traditionalist movement or neo-Buddhist arts that have dominated contemporary Thai art (Apinan, 1996 cited in Pandit, 2006), they can also be located at a non-mainstream position in the Thai contemporary art world.

### 3.2.2.1 Rirkrit Tiravanija

Rirkrit was born in Buenos Aires to a Thai diplomat family and raised in the various cities in the world including Bangkok. His *Phad Thai* project made him the most widely known Thai artist on the international scene. Thai fried noodle known as *Phad Thai* was invented in the nationalistic 1940s as a supposedly authentic Thai dish in contrast to the Chinese noodles or *kuay teow*. As cooked by the overseas Thai artist Rirkrit, *Phad thai* gains political sentiment, according to Pandit (2006). At the same time, cooking-as-art is not a conventional art activity or exhibition, which Pandit argues “emancipates the notion of museum and art gallery” because “the act of cooking in museums and art galleries is such an ‘out of place’ act” in the politics of aesthetics (Pandit, 2006:78). Similarly Rirkrit’s *Untitled* (1996) was the recreation of his apartment in New York. The artist lets people sleep, take showers and have parties in the installation, which works as a part of relational aesthetics “bringing non-art audience into museum and gallery” (Pandit, 2006:86) and creating community there.

Together with Chiang Mai-based artist Kamin Lertchaiprasert, Rirkrit bought land in a Chiang Mai city suburb, where they can plant rice and live as a farmer, and initiated “The Land” project (1998). “The Land” project was well noticed by foreign art lovers because of its novelty in the art world, as it was “meant to be a platform for artists and non-artists to cultivate their experience of social engagement” (Pandit, 2006:87) even though two Thai artists insisted that the project was not an art project. The Land project involved some foreign artists who joined in the project and stayed at the site in Northern Thailand as a farmer.

Presently Rirkrit is probably the most famous Thai artist and “his international success made him a heroic figure and a role model inspiring young artists since mid-1990s” (Kunawichayanon, 2002 cited in Pandit, 2006:78).

### 3.2.2.2 Navin Rawanchaikul

Born to be an Indian-Thai family and raised in Chiang Mai, Navin Rawanchaikul is another internationally famous Thai artist whose works mostly reflect its

relationship to the public. What made him internationally known as an artist is “Navin Gallery Bangkok “(1995-2000), in which he turned a taxi into an art gallery space. Depending on guest artists, he put video monitors, art objects or paintings into a taxi and exhibited them to passengers. Pandit (2006:105) suggests that “Navin’s mobile gallery project points to the participatory artwork as it can be re-located to another public sphere”. Pandit (2006) also argues that Navin’s exhibition, “Navin and His Gang (Visit Vancouver” (1997), which involved curators, museum staff and even museum security guards closes the gap between art and reality by blurring the boundary between art museums and artist, staff, and the audience. Pandit (2006) calls Navin’s work “transversal art”, creative pieces that allow the non-art people to become involved with his artwork and erases the differentiations between art (artist and his works) and audience.

Navin has also used a comic-book format for parts of his installations (“Fly With Me to Another World”, 2000 and “Lost in the City”, 2007). The artist makes copies of comic books available for reading in the installation space or for purchase. In the “Lost in the City” exhibition, he presented the life of the well-known Silk King Jim Thompson, to celebrate Thompson’s would-be 100 years birthday. In the “Lost in the City” project, Navin used not only various forms of art including video, comic, and painting, but he also created T-shirts, bags, comic books, board games and key holders for purchase to commemorate the occasion (Photo 3.5 and Photo 3.6).



Photo 3.5 Lost in the City exhibition at Jim Thompson art center, Bangkok in 2007. Various media (such as painting and video in the photo) was used for the exhibition. Source: Photograph taken by author in 2007.



Photo 3.6 Lost in the City exhibition at Jim Thompson art center, Bangkok in 2007. T-shirts, bags, comic books and some more goods produced by Navin were available for purchase at the art center. Source: Photograph taken by author in 2007.

### 3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, two new aesthetic phenomena in contemporary culture were introduced, namely aesthetics of DIY in indie boom, and aesthetics of experiment, which blurs the distinction between conventional concept of art and popular culture.

The notion of indie subculture emerged out of the British music scene and then spread to other countries in many different guises. As leading Thai indie artists experienced art education in Western countries and some of the artists are non-Thai, Thai indie seems to be a reflection of a hybridized global culture as well as counter-culture against mainstream forms of expression in Thailand. Technological developments such as internet, cable TV and digital video, which are global culture promoters, are significant aspects of indie scene in Thailand. Since indie is independent from mainstream commercial-oriented culture, the culture was supposed to be for arts or artists but not financial profit. The DIY is basic aesthetics of indie culture, but the capitalistic system start to eat original spirit of indie, and indie culture seems to become anything as long as it is “cool, creative, and different” (Andrews, 2006). The beginning of the indie movement brought by Generation X artists, who were weary of pretty and cute teenage-focused arts dominated by massive corporations in the late 1980s and early 1990s, held the aesthetics of independence from mainstream industry. But the new generation, who brought indie culture such popularity, appreciates it as one of culture styles, not a counterculture against commercialism. The new generation does not feel as profound an attachment to the philosophy of indie as the previous generation does. Generation Y has been raised in an indie environment with indie music, film, art and literature, therefore they wish for freedom and independence as their lifestyle. They are probably the first generation in Thailand who enjoy post-modernity, that is, they are natural-born postmodernists. With the growth of capitalism, the new generations share similar aesthetics influenced by globalization, which can be called “global culture”. Indie is probably one cultural step of a new age.

The question is whether the indie soul has died out, and if it is completely controlled by capitalistic and mainstream systems. Is indie only a matter of aesthetics, of just wanting to be cool, creative, and different? In following chapters, these questions

will be addressed in order to understand a significance of the new emerging arts and artists, both aesthetically and socially.

On the other hand, the emerging creators in various forms of art and popular culture such as music, film, literature, and cartoon, those who initiated indie culture, have been making the notion of art more complex and hazy. The artists' challenge against the long-established conception of art in Thailand, which emphasizes professionalism and exclusivity, in other words, conservative attitude toward adoption of new media, style or stance. The challenge is conspicuous in the vibrancy of the new creators' collaborations or communities<sup>18</sup>. Their artistic styles are alternative, avant-garde or experimental in each field, and sometimes traditional masters in their chosen fields criticized their ingenuity, in much the way Prabda's writing was.

The new emergent artists practice in both the so-called "art" and "popular culture", that is, they use different mediums, or multi-media, for the expression. Furthermore, these multi-talented artists collaborate with each other beyond their background, and it accordingly blurs the notion of art. This is why this study classifies some practitioners of popular culture such as a comedian, cartoonist or musician into an artist, and calls their subjects arts. They also comment on the convention of arts (film, cartoon, comedy or any) both in and out of Thailand by trying a new artistic style or using an experimental approach. Therefore, postmodern literature works by Prabda and one-microphone performance by Udom become popular among Thais, while Wisut's cartoon is welcomed by Japanese readership and Apichatpong's film and artworks of Navin and Rirkrit are internationally appreciated. The new emergent artists are aesthetically challenging in both Thai and non-Thai gaze.

Even though these artists do not express their political message in obvious way, this study attempts to see that the emergence of the artists is also significant in terms of the cultural-political viewpoint. Compared to obvious and vigorous art movement in the 1970s, which was encouraged by politicized student uprisings, these contemporary artists' stance has been defined by only non-mainstream and independent philosophies. This chapter briefly introduced new emergent arts and artists, and placed them in the politics of aesthetics both in and out of Thailand. However, their challenge is not only in

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<sup>18</sup> This concept of community will be discussed in chapter VII

aesthetic sphere, but also in cultural politics. In following chapters it will be examined that their art works demonstrate their struggles against Thai hegemony.

As most of the artists are both direct (through overseas education) and indirect (internet, cable television and so on) appreciators of global culture, their attitudes against the state policy on globalization are very pertinent, and it will be examined in the following chapters. As seen in the previous chapter, the state and non-state actors such as business sectors, have responded toward globalization by using the ideas of Thai national identity. This study assumes that the tendency became even more fervent especially after the economic crisis in 1997, and affected Thai contemporary art forms as well. The next chapter discusses how post-crisis Thai cinema reflects the ideology of Thainess, and how newly emergent artists respond to it.



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## CHAPTER IV

### GLOBALIZATION AND THAI NATIONAL IDENTITY IN POST-CRISIS THAI CINEMA

“This IMF thing is just like being colonized.”

“We avoid old-fashioned imperialism, why can't we avoid this?”

These are the statements by leading businessmen at a USIS seminar after the economic crisis in 1997 (Pasuk and Baker, 2000:165). While Thailand enjoyed economic growth and accepted new technology in the 1980s, the word “globalization” became a fashionable topic of discussion. The globalization Thais appreciated since the 1980s was experienced simultaneously with economic growth. However, at the same time, globalization resulted in the monetary catastrophe in 1997, according to some Thais.

One of the conventional Thai prides of its historiography is the belief that Thailand has never been colonized. Surrounded by the former colonial countries of Britain and France, Thais appears perpetually proud of their un-colonized history and happily claim that Thailand is the only country in the Southeast Asia never to be colonized. With this dignified understanding of history, Thais seemingly find that globalization has brought not solely a crisis of their economy but also their identity. In this chapter, how one of the visual art forms, Thai cinema, after the economic crisis was influenced by globalization, and keeps portraying Thai identity will be examined. The aim of this chapter is to look at a series of mainstream post-crisis movies from the perspective of patriotic sentiment attributed to excessive globalization, and how independent arts challenge this trend by representing alternative identities.

Thai cinema has been used for political means by Thai leaders such as Phibun or Pridi in its history. However, the importance of post-crisis mainstream films after 1997 is that they have been produced by the private sector, not by government or political elites. In this sense, this chapter seeks possibilities of popular nationalism in Thai cinema after the financial crisis. In the first section, Thai social background on globalization and the politics of Thai national identity will be reviewed, then the next two sections look at how Thai commercial cinema reflects the trend of mass nationalistic sentiment by using Thainess and un-Thainess. Finally, in the last section, I will examine how independent



artists are opposing the trend of mainstream films.

#### **4.1 Economic Crisis and Globalization**

The economy in Thailand, before the predicament, enjoyed its booming through export-oriented industrialization and financial liberalization. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (2000:31) viewed the turning point to be in the mid-1980s, after the second oil crisis, and described the origin of the disaster was in “the systematic disordering of economic policy making as a result economic growth, neoliberal-inspired financial liberalization, and democratization” brought by “the result of the formation of a specific political coalition encompassing the World Bank and IMF, the network of newly empowered Thai technocrats, and ambitious new Thai business group”. Pre-crisis Thailand accepted gargantuan foreign investment.

On the other hand, globalization has been a narrative since the 1980s. As the term first was used in an economic context, globalization was naturally regarded as an important aspect for Thai economic growth because the industrialization in Thailand since the 1980s and overseas influence was impossible to be separated.

##### **4.1.1 Making Thainess**

Thainess, or *khwamphenthai*, is generally believed to describe the common nature or identity of Thais, although there is no official definition of Thainess. Rather some scholars claim that Thainess modifies depending on time and context. In spite of no clear definition of Thainess, Thais often seem to be concern about what their identity is. Thongchai Winichakul (1994:5) explains this ambiguous Thainess with using positive and negative identification.

If the domain of what is Thainess is hard to define clearly, the domain of what is not Thai --- that is, un-Thai --- is identified from time to time. Simultaneously, this identification helps us to define the domain of Thainess from the outside.

This is what he calls a negative identification. His examples of the Thai terms “*farang*” and “*khaek*”, which define people transcending any particular nation or ethnic group, show the words are not identifying characteristic of any particular people but just

un-Thainess<sup>1</sup>. In his understanding, once un-Thainess is defined, the opposite Thainess comes out. Similarly Pavin Chachavalpongpun (2005) insists that Thainess is empty. According to him, Thainess is an imaginary product by Thai elites for their specific purpose or private interest. With his case studies on ethnic insurgencies along the Thai-Burmese border, drug trade, and Burmese admission into ASEAN, he points out how Thainess has been created and changed through relations between Thailand and Burma, a typical country of un-Thainess. Burma has been the national enemy since 1767 when they destroyed the city of Ayutthaya and monasteries around there. Sunait Chutintaranond and Than Tun (1995) discuss that in the past Burma had been regarded as an enemy of Buddhism owing to their plundering of Buddhist temples, but in the nation-building period they became an enemy of Thai nation.

King Chulalongkorn, in his commentary on the memoirs of Prince Narinthewi, considers the 1767 war to have been a war between two countries, Muang Thai or Phaendin Thai and Muang Phama (Thailand and Burma), instead of a war between the two rival rulers. Vajiravudh, in his article on the benefit of living in *dhamma*, condemns the Burmese as *adhamma* or an unjust nation which, without moral justification, had subdued “our righteous nation” and inflicted a great deal of damage, mentally and physically upon the Thai. Luang Wichitwathakan, Phibun’s most important propagandist, in many places in his works on history and in his theatrical scripts, pictured the Burmese as an enemy of Thai Nation. Since then, the image of the Burmese as an enemy of the Thai nation has become an invariable ingredient in modern Thai historiography (Sunait and Than, 1995).

Pavin (2005) indicates the image of Burma as the Thai national enemy has been modified with the rise of the Chatichai regime in 1988. Chatichai Choonhavan reckoned Burma as a market place, accordingly, the traditional concept of Thainess made by the image of Burma as an enemy had to change as well. Chatichai reshaped the long-established image of Burma into non-hostility image, which is not abhorrent to Thainess, with the support of Chavalit and the military. Unavailability of Burma as un-Thainess caused Chatichai to replace it with *farang* countries, which boycotted Burmese military government. After the regime of Chatichai, the Chavalit government kept *farang* as un-Thainess while

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<sup>1</sup> According to New Model Thai-English Dictionary (So, 1965), *Farang* means 1. the guava, 2. a white man, white, Western, 3. (of plant) native of a foreign country. *Khaek* means 1. a stranger, a foreigner, except a Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao (Laotian), Burmese or a white man; an Indian, a Malay, a negro, a person from the Near East or Middle East, a person from North Africa. 2. a visitor, a guest.

maintaining friendship close tie with Burma, and the most threat to Thainess at the time was Thai *hua nok* or “foreign-headed” people, those who had acquired Western education and *tam kon farang* or tagged along behind Westerners. Pavin (2005) understands that shifts in Thainess are made by Thai power-holders for their specific purpose or interest and gives by way of examples, the legitimacy of his throne for King Chulalongkorn, the establishment of successful military state for Phibun, and economic build-up for Chatichai and Chavalit. Thainess is an insubstantial identity made by its opposition brought about by Thai elite for their interests.

#### 4.1.2 Globalization and Thainess

In the era of globalization, what really is Thai is a growing concern and numerous discussions over globalization, even its translation into Thai, has ensued. The impact of globalization was not only economic, but also cultural and the influence of foreign power reasonably threatened Thai national identity. A symbolic phenomenon was the trend of studying Tai in northern Southeast Asia and southern China since the 1980s. Craig Reynolds (1998) says that it is “a kind of ethnic nostalgia, a reclamation of identity that resides in the yet-to-be-globalized Tai minority in the region”.

With the economic boom, Thainess since the middle of the 1980s became not only a concern but also a target for consumption in the international tourism market. A series of campaign to promote Thai tourism, “Brilliant Thailand” (1986), “Visit Thailand Year” (1987), “Exotic Thailand – Golden Places, Smiling Faces”, “Thailand Arts and Crafts Year”(1989), “I Love Thailand” (1990), “Exotic Thailand – See More of the Country, See More of the People” (1991) (Chaline, 1994, cited in Reynolds, 1998) express Thainess in the tourism industry. At the present time, we are quite familiar with the phrase “Amazing Thailand”.

Kasian Tejapira (2001) concludes his article on the post-modernization of Thainess, mentioning

“The current rapid and disconcerting changes in Thai identity have been brought about by two major forces. First, there is the pervasive process of economic and cultural globalization. On the other hand, there is the attempt of the Thai state to hold on to its cultural and political hegemony; to control the signification of Thainess amidst the flux of globalization and commodification.”

Globalization is not only a narrative of academic and business but the government as well. As mentioned in Chapter II, Thainess has been used for specific purposes by the state (Connors, 2005). The National Identity Board (NIB) established in 1980 has been promoting the ideology of democracy with the King as a head of state. In the economic upturn during the late 1980s and the 1990s, cultural policy remained with the monarchy which is believed to stand for the nation, religion and democracy. After the economic downturn since 1997, the idea of localism, looking at the inner country to resistant foreign impact, became a mainstream and this reflected the establishment of the Ministry of Education, Religion and Culture in 1999 (Connors, 2005). The monarchy has been most intensely identified as Thainess in the state cultural politics. New creation of the Ministry of Culture by Thaksin Shinawatra in 2002 generated some anxiety among people, for example, Sujit Wongthep, an editor of *Silapawatthanatham* journal<sup>2</sup> expressed his concern that the Ministry would signify a return to Phibun days of state decrees on appropriate forms of behavior. On the other hand, Chakrarot Chitrabongs (2002 cited in Connors, 2005), the Secretary General of the National Culture Commission, explained the reasons of the establishment of the Ministry of Culture,

At this moment we receive influence from foreign culture through various media ... so much so that we can not even select or screen it ... This is a problem, for people all over the world not just Thais. It is necessary that we have a central coordinating agency to screen, watch over, and warn whether this thing or that thing will bring progress or loss to our society, and unit to do this is the Ministry of Culture.

The plan of the Ministry of Culture in 2003 enforced monarchy and negative impact on consumerism and globalization, but at the same time mentioned culture as capital. Minister Anurak Jurimat emphasized possibilities of culture as commercial use (Connors, 2005).

A series of Thai state cultural policies after 1997 in some way implies an emergence of cultural nationalism. As mentioned before, both state and non-state sectors had comparative viewpoints to culture in the globalization era, that is, firstly looking at foreign impact as a strong concern to Thai national identity, and later using culture, which they believe to be Thai, for promotion in the global market for capitalistic grounds.

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<sup>2</sup> *Silapawatthanatam* magazine also reflects Thai cultural politics. See details in Hong (2000).

The 1997's financial crisis hit Thailand seriously. After the crisis, the country had to accept the bailout of the IMF, which made some Thai citizen feel colonized by the West. The campaigns like "Thais-Help-Thais" and "Buy Thai" were initiated by the government. Thaksin's political party *Thai Rak Thai* (Thais Love Thais), whose name itself sounds patriotic, insisted on stopping buyouts by foreign business and promoting local business. Giles Ji Ungpakorn (1999) points to nationalism by left-of-center academics and political commentators who regarded the 1997 crisis as a serious threat to "national independence". Those academics and commentators attributed the cause of the crisis to "Globalization", which means expansion and penetration of Western transnational firms into Southeast Asian economies (Pitaya, 1998 cited in Giles, 1999). Furthermore, the idea of self-sufficiency, self-reliance and returning to a simple economy, was pronounced by the King at his birthday speech in 1997. These series of movements after the 1997 economic crash reveal that Thais were looking at the nation as an object to save, and globalization as an enemy that brought the disaster into the kingdom.

#### **4.2 Positive and Negative Identification Cinema**

As Thongchai (1994) identified Thainess by defining what is not Thai, negative identification is also useful to examine how Thainess is portrayed in Thai cinema. This chapter categorized a series of post crisis nationalistic films into two types. The first type is negative identification cinema, which mainly represents a conflict or battle with the un-Thainess as a main plot, and consequently a hero or heroine can be a defender of Thainess. Another type of Thai post crisis cinema is positive identification cinema. This is a usage of Thainess, which has been believed to be Thai and established among the masses, in other words, very Thai or *thai-thai*. Since this Thainess has been well known, it does not necessarily require an enemy to make it highlighted. The difference of negative and positive identification cinema is that the latter does not apply un-Thainess in a main plot of cinema. In positive identification cinema, Thainess is overtly expressed even though the scene itself is not particularly important to the storyline.

#### 4.2.1 Negative Identification Cinema

##### 4.2.1.1 Burma as Representative of Un-Thainess: *Bangrajan* (Bangrajan, Thanit Jintanukul, 2000) and *Suriyothai* (Suriyothai, Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol, 2001)

Burma as un-Thainess is popular in Thai cinema as well. Sunait and Than (1995) explained that the country became an enemy of Thailand since the reign of King Rama V. Although Chatichai tried to wipe off Thai hostility against Burma, the country has stayed as a great rival of Thailand. War stories with Burma are common, not solely in historical writings, but also textbooks, TV drama, theatre play, advertisement and certainly cinema since Burma has been at the position as an enemy of Thai nation since its nation-building era. Portraying Burma as an enemy is perhaps the easiest way to flatter Thainess.

It was 2000 when *Bangrajan* was screened. *Bangrajan* is a historical story of fighting between Thai villagers and Burmese invaders in 1767. *Bangrajan* is the name of a village in the north of Ayutthaya, of which residents bravely combated Burmese invaders when they plundered the capital Ayutthaya. The legend of *Bangrajan* is widely known among Thais since it has been learned through textbooks, drama, music and historical novels (Sunait, 2000). Even Sunait and Than (1995:29) mentioned, “In my opinion, the most influential historical novels written before the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century were Mai Muangdoem’s (Kan Phungbun na Ayudhya) *Bangrajan* and *Khunsuk*” In historical chronicles, Ayutthaya was taken over by Burma in 1767 and naturally the villagers of *Bangrajan* were overcome by their adversaries in the movie. However, the film expresses the bravery of the villagers rather than mortification by their defeat. *Bangrajan* was the most successful movie in that year. The legend was in fact used for advertising commercial before the movie was released. In 1998, the EGAT (Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand) took the story of the *Bangrajan* fight to promote Thai people to consume less electricity. Patrick Jory (1999:481) analyzes, “the message is for all Thais to make the same sacrifices as the villagers of *Bangrajan* to save the nation” in the situation of the financial emergency.

Another historical epic, *Suriyothai*, the most costly Thai movie in history at the

time, came out in 2001 after three years of shooting and post-production. The film is also the most royal-involved film ever as Amporn Jirattikorn (2003:300) states

The idea of making film was initiated by HM Queen Sirikit, who sponsored the entire film production and played an active role in many aspects of the film-making process. MC Chatri Chalerm Yugala, a veteran filmmaker (also known as Than Mui, himself a descendent of the Thai royal family), was asked by HM the Queen to be the director. The Queen also chose the leading actress, a minor member of the royal family and one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting.

*Suriyothai* appears, compared to the former *Bangrajan*, less expressive in terms of the un-Thainess of Burma. The story displays a battle between Thai and Burmese as well, however it mainly refers to the intra-royal-court conflict between Queen Suriyothai and Thao Sisudachan, a royal consort. Nevertheless the story of the Queen Suriyothai is conversant among Thais as a national heroine to sacrifice herself to save the King. Sunait Chutintaranond (2001:35) mentioned “great emphasis on Queen Suriyothai as a national heroine was founded during the period when the idea of Thailand being a “nation state” was introduced. ... the Queen’s image as a faithful consort was interestingly overwhelmed and later on replaced with an image of a national sacrificer who devoted her life for the safety of the King, the Nation and the Buddhism”. It denotes that the anecdote of Queen Suriyothai itself has already been framed as a nationalistic epic no matter what the story itself really tells.

Glen Lewis (2003) points out the apparent links between the two movies with nationalistic impulses and Thai political situation at the time, naming *Bangrajan* popular nationalism and *Suriyothai* elite nationalism. His argument is that the political instability since 1995 after the fall of the Chuan regime, following a series of events such as an emergence of new leaders like Banharn and Chavalit, financial exigency, the establishment of a new constitution, the re-election of Chuan, and acceptance of IMF request, were behind the new style of nationalism seen in Thai cinema. Amporn (2003:300) views the movies analogously, stating “as events following the economic crisis seemed to affirm the sense that the country was endangered or even invaded by the neo-colonialist IMF, Suriyothai has re-enforced the long-held belief that Thailand has maintained its sovereignty against foreign forces for a good five hundred years and will continue to do so in the future”. In addition to Amporn’s analysis that *Suriyothai* can be

attributed to the economic crisis, she gives two more explanations for the making of *Suriyothai*; the popularity of Princess Suphankalaya cult and the release of new version of the Hollywood movie Anna and the King (Andy Tennant, 1999).

Princess Suphankalaya cult, which began from Thai monk Luang Poo Ngone Soraya claiming that her spirit had visited him, was a very popular phenomenon in 1997 to 1998. The Princess Suphankalaya (Songpol, 1999 cited in Amporn, 2003) was an older sister of King Naresuan, but never stood out in history. A new story, according to the monk, is the following. While she and her two brothers Naresuan and Ekathotsarot were kept as hostage in Burma, she became a consort of Bayingnaung, the king of Burma, and she was able to persuade the Burmese king to let her brothers return Ayutthaya. Therefore both brothers were able to eventually achieve the independence of Ayutthaya. Her brother finally became King Naresuan the Great. The Princess, on the other hand, was killed when she was eight months pregnant by an avenger of the Burmese crown princess. Amporn (2003) insists that the cult of the self-less Princess healed desperate Thais in the political and economic crisis. This popular cult of the Princess Suphankalaya claimed by the local monk, she argues, becomes a good contrast of *Suriyothai* who is well known in historical textbooks.

Another element behind *Suriyothai*, according to Amporn (2003), was the production of the Hollywood film Anna and the King, which has never been screened in Thailand because of its accusation for historical inaccuracy and portrayal of Thai monarchy. In the interview (Amporn, 2003), Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol, the director of *Suriyothai* answered that the film was intended for comparison with the Hollywood movie since it was released at the same time, emphasizing on his historical accuracy and deep studies on Thai history. Even, Amporn (2003) discusses, the story of *Suriyothai* narrated from the point of an outsider, here Portuguese mercenary, makes comparison with Anna and the King clearly.

In conclusion, both series of Burmese-as-national-emery cinema, *Bangrajan* and *Suriyothai* seem to account for Thai national sentiment after the crisis of Thai economy and politics around 1997. However, these two films have different aspects. *Suriyothai* is full of connection with the royal family; its initiation and funding. Even the cult of princess and the inaccurate portrayal of Thai monarchy (from the Thai perspective) in the



Hollywood movie were behind the film. Furthermore the director himself is a member of royal family, who was chosen by the Queen. Considering above, Lewis's suggestion, *Suriyothai* as elite nationalism and *Bangrajan* as popular nationalism makes a persuasive argument. In spite of this elite and popular difference, the emergence of two nationalistic films is important, as it probably became a trigger of following similar taste movies.

**4.2.1.2 The Greatest King Saves the Nation: *Khan Kluay* (*Khan Kluay*, Kompin Khemkamnerd, 2006), *Tamnan Somdet Phra Naresuan Maha Rat Phak Ong Prakan Hong Sa* (*The Legend of King Naresuan part 1: Hongsawadee's Hostage*, Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol, 2007), and *Tamnan Somdet Phra Naresuan Maha Rat Phak Prakat Isaraphap* (*The Legend of King Naresuan part 2: Reclamation of Sovereignty*, Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol, 2007)**

The portrayal of the Thai-Burmese battle is still fashionable even at present time after almost 10 years when Thai citizens suffered the financial downturn. *Khan Kluay*, *Tamnan Somdet Phra Naresuan Maha Rat Phak Ong Prakan Hong Sa* and *Tamnan Somdet Phra Naresuan Maha Rat Phak Prakat Isaraphap* are based on historical writings on the events of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. King Naresuan is one of the most respected Kings and heroes among Thais, who helped gain the independence of Ayutthaya from Hongsawadee, or Burma. Since the War of the White Elephants in 1564, Naresuan became a hostage and grew up in the court of Hongsawadee with the grandson of King Burengnong. Insurgency after the death of the King Burengnong was an opportune timing for Naresuan to break out from the Burmese court, and Naresuan ultimately proclaimed the independence of Ayutthaya. *The Legend of King Naresuan* is a large-budget trilogy with the director Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol, who also directed *Suriyothai*, and first two films have been released by the time of this writing. The last part is scheduled to be screened in December 2007. On the other hand, *Khan Kluay* is based on a historical writing mentioning “King Naresuan’s royal elephant whose back has the elegant curve of a banana branch or *khan kluay*” (Kong, 2006b). Both Naresuan series and *Khan Kluay* feature battles with Burma with a famous historical episode of Naresuan, are inevitably thought to be nationalistic in terms of Burma as un-Thainess. *Khan Kluay*, a child-oriented 3D animation movie,

includes a scene that one elephant unfolds to the kid elephant Khan Kluay how proud it is to sacrifice his life for his country by warring with Burmese invaders. In the film, Burmese soldiers and even Burmese elephants are visualized as terrible evil images (Figure 4.1). This sacrifice of self for the nation, and evil image of the otherness, reflects exactly what Kong Rithdee (2006b) calls “the sharp note of jingoism”. Meanwhile, the director of the Legend of King Naresuan answers to the perturbation of recent Thai films’ insensitivity to draw neighboring countries with emphasis,

We can't approach the story of King Naresuan with a sense of Thai nationalism, because there was no concept of a unified country in those days. Various cities made up the region in the 16th century, and King Burengnong of Burma conquered all these city-states under his wing. Films like Ghost Game<sup>3</sup> or Mak Te<sup>4</sup> might have provoked some reaction because they portrayed neighbouring countries as inferior to us. But in Naresuan, I portray Burma as a superior place to Ayutthaya. I didn't set out to make them our ultimate enemy. (M.C. Chatrichlern Yukol in Kong, 2006d)

In the first two parts of the Naresuan series, the King of Hongsa and his people are not portrayed with prejudice as the director claimed. Nonetheless we can discern the sense of nationalism at the scene of the cockfight where Siamese cockerel and Burmese rooster skirmished with each other. Young Naresuan never believed the Siamese fighter would lose because it was from Siam.

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<sup>3</sup> Ghost Game is a Thai horror movie screened in 2006. The usage of the Khmer Rouge as a plot was claimed by Cambodian officials. See chapter V for more detail.

<sup>4</sup> Mak Te is Thai title of “Lucky Loser”, a Thai soccer comedy movie supposed to be screened just before opening of World Cup 2006. Humiliating portrayals of Laotian was claimed by Laotian officials. See chapter V for more detail.



Figure 4.1. Image of Burmese Elephant in *Khan Kluay*. Source: *Khan Kluay* (2006)

**4.2.1.3 The West and Foreign-headed Thais as Globalization Promoters: *Homrong* (The Overture, Ittisuntorn Wichailuck, 2004), *Nong Teng Nakleng-Pukaotong* (Nong Teng Nakleng-Pukaotong, Panitch Sodsi, 2006), *Thawi Phop* (The Siam Renaissance, Surapong Pinitka, 2004), and *Muepuen/Lok/Phra/Chan* (Killer Tattoo, Yuthlert Sippapak, 2001)**

Another facile otherness is Western power. The first three movies represent the era of modernization when Thais met the West or Western culture while the last film portrays future Thailand occupied by the West. As Thais likened the acceptance of the IMF to being colonized, these films of stories when Siam faced the Western modernization and felt the threat of colonization are worth noting. Intriguingly, all three films are describing the defender of traditional Thai identity, here classic Thai culture (in *Homrong*, and *Nong Teng Nakleng-Pukaotong*) and Thai nation as Siam (in *Thawi Phop*). However, hatred to the West is not strongly expressed. On the other hand, *Muepuen/Lok/Phra/Chan*, which sets Thailand in 2011 occupied by the West, sharply shows anti-Westerner and anti-foreign-headed-Thai sentiment.

*Homrong* was one of the most successful movies in 2004, and it also went to

international screening, including Japan. The story is about the life of the *ranard-ek* wooden xylophone player, Sorn, from his childhood to his death covering the era of King Rama V to King Rama VIII. The director Itthisunthorn Wichailak says that he was inspired by the biography of Luang Pradit Phairao, a great master of Thai traditional musical instruments in the period of Rama VIII (Itthisunthorn in Shirata, 2004). The film portrays mainly Sorn's younger days when he faced his rival xylophone player and had vehement matches with the rival over playing the instrument. However, the message of the film gets much clearer when aged Sorn fights against the government's policy to prohibit Siamese traditional music in order to promote the Western civilization during the World War II, by his continuing to play the *ranard-ek*. In an interview on the official Japanese website of the film (Shirata, 2004)<sup>5</sup>, the director explicates the motivation of producing the film, answering that he thought that Thai people were losing Thainess and following the Western culture too much, and then Thailand had to face the economic crisis. The crisis made him think it was because Thais followed the Western model of financial growth but not their own style and gave him a chance to envisage shooting a movie. Eventually the life of Luang Pradit Phairao fit his intention.

In the film, Sorn opposes the government who tried to prevent him from playing his melodies, as they followed the Western style under the name of modernization. Accordingly this is not a direct criticism against the West but the government that encouraged Western culture excessively and undervalued Thai traditional culture. The political regime in the movie overlaps the people as the so-called "Thai *hua nok*" or foreign-headed tagging along behind the Westerners, who were also criticized as un-Thai after the financial plight.

*Nong Teng Nakleng-Pukaotong* depicts a similar binary collision between tradition and modernity although its genre as comedy makes it less straightforward. The story traced to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when cinema firstly came to Thailand. Teng, a leading actor of traditional Thai folk drama play *likay*, whose theater has a financial problem, and Nong, his fellow, found a movie set team with mostly *farang* taking over his theater. Therefore, as it might be easily expected, there would be a conflict between them, traditional *likay* supporters and modern cinema promoters. It is the movie on the

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<sup>5</sup> Translated by author of this thesis.

birth of cinema in Thailand and of course never became critical about it, however a bilateral structure still exists here. *Likay* can represent a defender of the traditional Thai culture, but cinema is not necessarily offensive to it.

*Thawi Phop* is one of the intellectual movies made in Thailand according to Lewis (2006), notwithstanding that the plot is unrealistic. One day Maneejan, a Paris-based archivist, encounters a newly discovered manuscript showing the Eiffel tower in 19<sup>th</sup> century Siam before actual being built in France, which means that Siam was colonized by both Britain and French with the Chaophraya river as its border. After moving back to Thailand, she somehow acquires supernatural power to travel back and forth in time between the past, at the time Siam was under struggle between two colonial powers of Britain and France, and the present 2004. Maneejan meets Siamese elites in 1855 and explains the situation in future Siam, or Thailand, where she comes from. The scene reflects apparent criticism against present Thailand influence by the West.

In the film, Maneejan suffers from the incompatibility between her love, whom she meets in the past and knew would lose his life in the Pak Nam incident, for Thai un-colonized history. At the end of the movie, she volunteers to live in the past and never returns to the present day although she keeps Thai national history as it should be. Pandit Chanrochanakit (2006) analyzes the role of Maneejan as a vulnerable observer in what he calls “Siamese diorama”, the Thai national imaginary.

Nevertheless these three movies on the modernization era, even though they keep binary conflicts between Thainess and Westernness, are never offensive to what the West has brought to the country. In the first and second film, Western culture, respectively piano and cinema, is not the object to fight against, but the traditional culture suppressers.

Meanwhile *Muepuen/Lok/Phra/Chan* represents obvious aggression against the West and their followers. Although a main plot of the film is not about anti-West but a group of Thai killers who suffered from an individual traumatic past experience, an interesting point comes from a setting that their antagonists are mainly *farangs* or Caucasians. Even one scene, spoken in English, shows sharp antagonism against the West, when Thai hitman Kit Silencer, a main character in the story, battles with a female fighter from a *farang* group. The female fighter asked Kit, “So have you got a girlfriend?” and

Kit answers, “I don’t like *farang*”. She replies with surprise, “Oh I heard that all Thais were simply crazy about *farang*”. Then Kit’s response was “Not me!”. The director Yuthlert Sippapak tells his idea behind filmmaking in the interview,

It comes from the fact that I hate Thais who are crazy about farang (klat khon thai thii khlung farang pen baa pen lang). I’m not attacking farangs here. It’s Thais I’m attacking. All I’m trying to do is to make a point to certain Thais who revere Westerners; like we always pay more to farang cinematographers and we eat hamburgers that cost more than Thai fast foods like curry on rice, even though it takes much more time and effort to make a curry. Why don’t we pay the same for each? This is the problem that I see for Thais. Hell, there’s no better place than the Thai nation for people that will do each other down. Maybe it comes from my gut reaction to oppose all this, like Hitler, who used film to change people’s beliefs. Film is incredibly powerful. But maybe we’ll fail because we’ve seen too many Hollywood movies, and Thais are always pinching ideas from Western films and remaking them for Thai audiences. So the problem is actually getting worse. At least people who see this film [‘Killer Tattoo’] might like the bit when one of the lead characters, played by Mam, jumps up and boots a farang in the mouth. Even though Mam dies afterwards in an explosion, he goes out in a blaze of glory (tai duay jai kern roi). I want Thais to turn round and really take a close look at themselves at this point. We should be saying to ourselves here, it doesn’t matter how we dress or what we look like on the outside, but please let’s at least ensure we have the inner heart of a Thai. (Yuthlert in Pinyo, 2003: 77 cited in Harrison, 2005:329)

The interviews of two directors, Itthisunthorn Wichailak of *Homrong* and Yuthlert Sippapak of *Muepuen/Lok/Phra/Chan* respectively, reveal their anxiety over losing Thai identity and threat of the West, and their response has been reflected in their film works.

#### 4.2.1.4 Thai Martial Arts to Save Thainess: *Ong-bak* (Ong-bak, Prachya Pinkaew, 2003) and *Tom Yum Goong* (Tom Yum Goong, Prachya Pinkaew, 2005)

*Ong-bak* and *Tom Yum Goong*, both directed by Prachya Pinkaew, are entertaining Thai-Thai movies. With simple story lines and spectacular action scenes without computer graphics, they both went to international market successfully. These two films features *Muay Thai*, Thai Boxing, as a method to save Thainess and starred a new made-in-Thailand superstar Ja Pantom or Tony Ja who was a real boxer in the past. What this Thai hero defends is a Buddha head of a village temple in *Ong-bak*, and village elephants, especially distinctive ones to be offered to the King, in *Tom Yum Goong*, which obviously signify Buddhism and what Pasuk and Baker (2000) calls Elephantism. Pasuk

and Baker (2000:185) explain Elephantism, “The elephant in Thailand has become a focus of popular emotion in an unusual way. It is not now part of official state iconography, although elephants (and especially the white elephant) are common in royal symbolism ... In the crisis the elephant became a focus for expressing emotions shared among people without invoking narratives about the nation or other imposed structure”. Interestingly those whom the hero wrestles with are mainly non-Thai, mostly *farang*, giant fighters. In the latter movie, elephants are kidnapped by one Asian mafia member who owns a Thai restaurant called Tom Yum Goong in Sydney, however the mafia is not Thai but Vietnamese. Usage of Thai Boxing as a defending method to save Buddhism and Elephantism against foreigners represents an apparent structure of “Thainess versus un-Thainess”.

#### **4.2.1.5 Save the Nation from Foreign Invader: *Thao Suranari* (not completed but planned in 2001)**

Compared to Burma, Laos is usually not portrayed as an enemy of the Thai nation. However Thai historical understanding of a Lao invasion into Thailand seemed to evoke Lao as un-Thainess. According to Chayanit Poonyarat (2001), a movie on Thao Suranaree, the legendary woman believed to be a savior of Thailand from a Lao invasion in 1827, was planned to be produced in 2001. Before the script came up or shooting of any scenes, however, Lao officials claimed that it could damage bilateral ties between the two countries, which became a deterrence to finishing the film, although the director insisted on no political intention at all. The heroine, who became the first commoner to have a national monument built in 1934 at North-eastern Nakhon Ratchasima city, has been used politically in Thai history. Saipin (cited in Chayanit, 2001) states, “Siam in 1932 was passing from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. A modern face showing women’s rights and people-power then was very much needed ... Thao Suranaree therefore perfectly served as an ideal symbol to show the locals’ loyalty to the Thai nation.” There is no record of the film after Chayanit’s article, therefore it is speculated that the production was discontinued.

**4.2.1.6 The Using of New Un-Thainess: *7Prachanban* (*7Prachanban*, Chalerm Wongpim, 2002), *7Prachanban part 2 (7 Street Fighters*, Chalerm Wongpim, 2005), and *Manut Leklai* (*Mercury Man*, Bhandit Thongdee, 2006)**

For their own interests or purposes, Thai power-holders have modified un-Thainess (Pavin, 2005), and the films examined above concern the usage of un-Thainess built up by Thai elites. However some filmic works featuring un-Thainess are not attributed to the crisis of the nation like the attack by Burma or the Western colonial powers, in other words, they are about a new un-Thainess created by Thai citizen. Such un-Thainess is well recognized among Thais because of their comprehension on Thai history.

*7Prachanban* and *7Prachanban part2* are comedy series films featuring seven Thai ex-soldiers. In the former film, Thai fighters take up arms with American military who settled in Thailand during the Vietnam War, and in the latter, with the Japanese army who stayed in Thailand during the World War II. Both American military and Japanese army were not official enemies of Thailand in its history, but at a village level, they might be harmful, or bothered villagers as portrayed in the films. As slapstick action film series, the serious hatred against the un-Thai is not expressive. However handling American and Japanese mockingly in the films looks even more humiliating. Such portrayals of United States and Japan, which have impact economically on present Thailand, make the film series nationalistic.

*Manut Leklai* is a challenging movie in present international politics while it is an acutely amusing action film obviously influenced by Hollywood *Ai Maengmum* series (*Spider-Man1,2,3*, Sam Raimi, 2002, 2004, 2007) or *Superman Returns* (*Superman Returns*, Bryan Singer, 2006). The hero Sharn, a Thai firefighter, accidentally obtains supernatural power from a Tibetan religious amulet (supposedly Buddhist), and becomes elected to halt international terrorists' activity. The terrorist leader, a palpable Muslim figure, whose name is Osama Bin Ali, had fervent malice against America since his wife and/or daughter were killed by an American soldier in Afghanistan. Osama attempts his revenge with his fellows, however, their jihad end unsuccessfully because Sharn stops the



attempt with his supernatural power. At the end Sharn guards Thai people and American military as well. The film, according to the production company Sahamongkol Film spokeswoman, features Thainess in a hero's costume and the style of fighting based on Thai boxing for an international box-office success (Nareerat, 2006). In some ways, the film seems to place Thai national positioned in the international political arena on behalf of the government.

**4.2.1.7 Un-Thainess Within: *Kabot Thao Si Suda Chan* (The Kingmaker, Lek Kitipraporn, 2005), and *Koet Ma Lui* (Born to Fight, Panna Rittikrai, 2004)**

Un-Thainess is mostly shown by non-Thai nationals in the Thai cinema examined above, but there are ways to defend Thainess within the country. Since an enemy is within the Thai nation, these stories are not nationalistic in terms of non-Thai as an enemy, however the otherness within also can play an important role to carry un-Thainess by setting a crisis of Thainess.

In *Kabot Thao Si Suda Chan*, femme-fatale Queen Sudachan, a royal consort in Ayutthaya, assassinated the King and Prince to replace the throne with her secret lover. Nonetheless her life conclusively ends by the sword of a Thai soldier and thought-provokingly Portuguese fighter, both loyal to the monarchy. Different from other Ayutthaya-period movies, the film does not include any Burmese combatant but an enemy of monarchy here is the immoral crafty Queen. Compared with the respected ideal Queen Suriyothai in the same period, who is moral and affecting to sacrifice herself for the King, Queen Sudachan can be perceived as the embodiment of un-Thainess. Since the monarchy becomes the most important factor of Thainess, anyone who challenges official monarchy can be called un-Thainess. On the other hand, the Portuguese soldier (with the Thai soldier) becomes a defender of ideal image for the royal family. This is an interesting example showing that non-Thai national can be a protector of Thainess (See details in later section in this chapter). In fact, the movie itself was made by a Thai director and a foreign producer. The dialogue in the film was spoken all in English, as it became the second all English-speaking Thai film after *Phra Chao Chang Puak* (The King of the White Elephant, 1940) of Pridi Banomyong, although the narrative of Thai

actors was dubbed in Thai language when screened in Thailand. Whether it holds any strong message by speaking in English, as Pridi's movie did, is unknown, however.

*Koet Ma Lui* is another spectacular action film after success of *Ong-bak*. Conflict between heroes composed of national athletes, and border terrorists, is a conspicuous bilateral structure of good and evil. The storyline is simple. In one day, terrorists attack innocent villagers when sports talents visit the village for an amusement event, ergo all the athletes can do is to fight with the terrorists to save the village. There are some interesting scenes explicitly expressing Thainess in the movie. When villagers and sport talents become hostages of the armed terrorists after the terrorists killed some of villagers, the villagers had no way to resist them. At the time, a radio accidentally broadcasts the national anthem of Thailand, then the villagers stood up bravely with chorusing the song despite the armed terrorists around them, and a big battle scene is initiated by their singing, "They (Thais) will sacrifice every drop of their blood to contribute to the nation. They will serve their country with pride and prestige, full of victory. Chai Yo."<sup>6</sup>. In the melee, one of the sport talents fights with terrorists holding a big national flag, even though holding the flag makes it difficult for him to assault the enemy. In the end the national athletes save not only the village, but also Thai nation from a nuclear missile the terrorists secretly plotted to explode.

## 4.2.2 Positive Identification Cinema

### 4.2.2.1 Portraying Monarchy as Thainess: *Sagai United* (Sagai United, Somching Srisuparp, 2004)

Established Thainess does not necessarily conflict with un-Thainess. This is because certain Thainess has been familiar with Thais at a deep level. In *Sagai United*, the Thainess does not involve a great role for the main plot however it is portrayed impressively to make the film more patriotic or nationalistic.

*Sagai United* is a typical soccer movie showing how a team struggles to win a championship. Paotu, an ethnic Thai man, accidentally enters the forest in southern

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<sup>6</sup> This translation of Thai anthem is available from [http://www.siamweb.org/content/Thailand/131/index\\_eng.php](http://www.siamweb.org/content/Thailand/131/index_eng.php). The official website of Royal Thai government also use this translation as resource.

Thailand, where ethnic Sagai reside, and finds that Sagai boys are highly proficient in playing soccer, then he persuades them to join the King's Cup tournament taking place in Bangkok. The Sagai are illustrated as barbarians who do not wear shoes in the film, and they also face city-temptations such as fashionable ladies, drugs, and nightclubs, which many young boys in Bangkok enjoy. However, they finally realize the importance of teamwork, and their talent for soccer fostered in the forest life brings them a championship. The main plot has nothing much to do about Thainess or un-Thainess, but an interesting point comes from the impressive depiction on Thai monarchy in the film. As a subplot, the Sagai people suffer from an unknown serious disease. A head of the Sagai, who once had brought his child to the royal medical care service "medicine given from the King", believes that the King's Cup "the cup given from the King", will also cure their people from suffering illness. After the Sagai boys' homecoming with the King's Cup, the king's medical group accidentally finds the Sagai village and finally hard-working doctors save the people with the scene focusing on "medicine given from the King". At the end of the story, Sagai villagers prostrate themselves in reverence to the King's cup with tears in their eyes (Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.3). The King, and what he brings to the village, are portrayed in a magnificent way.

In addition to *Sagai United*, numerous post-crisis Thai films have dealt with the monarchy with their main plot such as *Suriyothai* (2001), *Kabot Thao Si Suda Chan* (2005), *Khan Kluay* (2006), *Tamnan Somdet Phra Naresuan Maha Rat Phak Ong Prakan Hong Sa* (2007) and *Tamnan Somdet Phra Naresuan Maha Rat Phak Prakat Isaraphap* (2007) as examined already.

สถาบันวิทยบริการ  
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย



Figure 4.2. Sagai villagers pray to the King's cup with tears. Source: *Sagai United* (2004)



Figure 4.3. The King Cup with Thai flag which Sagai pray to. Source: *Sagai United* (2004)

#### 4.2.3 Nostalgia in Thai Cinema After the Crisis

Anchalee Chaiworaporn (2004a) designates a trend of “returning to the past” Thai cinema, which counts more than half of the production from 2000 to 2002, mentioning that Thai people feel a need for nostalgia, something they can rely on, or not ruin them, after the uncertainty brought by the 1997 financial crisis. The “returning to the past” cinema, defined by any film whose story happened more than two decades earlier

(Anchalee, 2004a), is also common among the movies addressed above. However, except for *Bangrajan* and *Suriyothai*, Anchalee (2004a) says that most post-crisis Thai cinema looks at Thai history through rose-colored vision and with no political description or interpretation, giving examples of *Ko Lang Wang* (New Born Blood, Akarapol Akarasarane, 2002) about Thai teen Elvis Presley lovers, and *Jan Dara* (Jan Dara, Nonzee Nimibutr, 2001) based on a scandalous novel in 1950s. Furthermore Anchalee (2004a) argues,

Unlike the people of former colonies, who might feel strongly against the West, Thai people have never been colonized and therefore have not had the antipathy to neocolonialism or globalization that has come to expression elsewhere. Instead, they have blamed incompetent political administrations for their woes. However, when the contemporary Thai political-economic situation provides no ray of hope, they turn instead to romantic fantasies about a historic simplicity of Thai lifestyle.

It is true that there are many post crisis movies recalling old Thai lifestyle without any nationalistic elements, and I concur with her that the economic and political unreliability made Thai people recollect the past, and it influenced film productions after 1997. However, in addition to nostalgia, the series of movies discussed in this chapter use Thainess in conflict with un-Thainess which has been defined through the nation-building process in Thai history. I rather would like to argue that the instability of politics and economy after the crisis produced *Bangrajan* and *Suriyothai*, which became a trigger to a series of cinema.

### **4.3 Marketing Thainess: Transnational Thai Cinema and Global Defender of Thainess**

1997 was a watershed year for Thai cinema industry. The emergence of three filmmakers from the advertisement industry, namely Nonzee, Pen-ek, and Oxide Pang, cast a new light on the stagnant Thai cinema world, which was dominated by teen-oriented movies since the early 1990s. The success of *2499Anthaphan Khrong Mueang* (Daeng Bailey and Young Gangster, 1998) by Nonzee Nimitbutr was attributed to, according to film critic Sananjit (cited in Anchalee, 2004d), its quality, particularly the cinematography, brought by featuring non-teen-idols or non-pop-stars. Pen-ek made his filmic debut with *Fun Bar Karaoke* (Fun Bar Karaoke, 1997), which did not enjoy as successful a box office as Nonzee's but came into the spotlight among the international

film circle. Since then, Pen-ek's works have made regular visit to the famous international film festivals; *Monrak Transistor* (Monrak Transistor, 2001) to the Cannes Film Festival, *Rueang Rak Noi Nit Mahasan* (Last Life in the Universe, 2003) to the Venice Film Festival, *Khamphiphaksa Khong Mahasamut* (Invisible Wave, 2006) to the Berlin Film Festival, and *Ploy* (Ploy, 2007) to Cannes. Wisit Sasanatieng, Pen-ek's colleague at an advertising studio, was the first the Thai filmmaker to Cannes with his *Fa Thalai Chon* (Tears of the Black Tiger) in 2000. The directorial debut of Yongyoot Thongkongtoon, *Satri Lek* (Iron Ladies, 2000) became commercially successful in the international markets from Asia to Europe, the United States and Latin America. This prosperity of Thai cinema, on both domestic and international stages, led its representation of Thainess to a next step, marketing Thainess.

It is true that the nationalistic films listed in the previous sections have been targeted to a global market. Amporn (2003) states that *Suriyothai* is becoming a global defender of Thainess, as HM Queen Sirikit recalls that she would love to introduce Suriyothai's name and story to the world. The director aimed at a nomination of *Suriyothai* for the Best Foreign Film Oscar by hiring foreign technicians, a director of photography, and a music composer for its production (Amporn, 2003). It was released in United States and edited by Francis Coppola, who is an old friend of the director at UCLA. The employment of the famous movie director for promotion is not only seen in *Suriyothai*, but *Bangrajan*, which was adapted and presented by famous filmmaker Oliver Stone in United States in 2004. *Tom Yum Goong* whose title in United States is "The Protector", screened there from September 2006 as "Quentin Tarantino Presents The Protector". World wide famous American movie directors have become defenders of Thainess.

Foreign eyes play an important role to defend Thainess as well. Amporn (2003) discussed that the story narrated by the point of Portuguese mercenary in *Suriyothai* is comparable to Hollywood film Anna and the King. Moreover the trend appears to express less self-praise of Thainess but is more praiseworthy by others. The usage of a Portuguese soldier as a guard of the moral monarchy in *Kabot Thao Si Suda Chan* and a Western-educated woman who sacrifices herself to the Siamese history in *Thawi Phop*, make Thainess justified by foreign views. This tendency is perceptible besides in the

cinema. Advertisement using Miss Universe, Natalie Glebova, saying “*Sawatdee*” and promoting Thai hospitality and Thai products is a convenient example (Veena and Sirinya, 2007). Mr. Todd Lavelle known by his new Thai name *Todd Thongdee* is an American writer who provides an example of how a *farang* can be so Thai-like as his writing messages how the true value of Thainess is superior to that of *farang*, according to Pavin (2005). The usage of *farang* to promote Thainess is their marketing strategy in the narrative of globalization.

#### 4.4 Thainess and Un-Thainess in the New Emerging Arts

##### 4.4.1 Not Amazing but Distinctly and Thoroughly Thai: *Dokfa Nai Mue Man* (*Mysterious Object at Noon*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2000)

Apichatpong Weerasethakul is an internationally well-known Thai filmmaker in spite of less recognition among domestic spectators. He is originally from Khon Kaen in Northeast Thailand, and educated at the Art Institute of Chicago after completion of his bachelor degree on Architecture at the Khon Kaen University. Having won a Cannes prize twice, many Apichatpong’s works have been shot in the countryside, including the forest, with avant-garde artistic style. He portrays a life of the rural in his experimental artist way. May Adadol Ingawanij and Recharad MacDonald (2006:250) analyze that “Apichatpong’s cinema provides a sharp contrast to the bourgeois heritage cinema exemplified by *Suriyothai*, whose functioning as a prestigious cultural commodity in Thailand is premised upon the hyperbolic conviction of its own international significance”.

His first feature film *Dokfa Nai Mue Man* is an experimental film blurring the definition of fiction and non-fiction. He used a Surrealist game, “exquisite corpse”<sup>7</sup>, and interviewed villagers through the game, which Mathew Ferrari (2006:13) understands that the auteur “tries not to speak for local Thai villagers – allowing them to speak for

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<sup>7</sup> Exquisite corpse is a method by which a collection of words or images are collectively assembled, the result being known as the exquisite corpse. Each collaborator adds to a composition in sequence, either by following a rule or by being allowed to see the end of what the previous person contributed (wikipedia English version).

themselves” and through filmmaking he “tries to stimulate a collective narration and generate a formal statement of local, indigenous Thai knowledge, he evokes a discourse on rural Thai identity in relation to Thai national identity in the age of globalization”. American film critic Chuck Stephen comments on *Dokfa Nai Mue Man* saying that it remains “distinctly and thoroughly Thai” (Stephens 2002 cited in May Adadol and MacDonald 2006) in terms of “the incidental provincial quotidian rather than amazing-Thailand style reproduction” (May Adadol and MacDonald, 2006: 257). The work of Apichatpong stands contrary to official Thainess and un-Thainess, and consequently challenges to it by portraying alternative Thainess that is natural for him, as a rural-grown Thai citizen.

#### **4.4.2 Burmese in Thailand: *Sut Saneha* (Blissfully Yours, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2002) and *Admit* (Admit, Natthapon Timmuang, 2007)**

The Burmese are not only a subject for mainstream cinema but independent filmmakers also look at them. *Sut Saneha* is Apichatpong’s first Cannes-winning, and second feature-length film. The story depicts the life of a Burmese illegal immigrant man in Thailand and provincial Thai women who are attracted to him. Apichatpong (in Second Run DVD, 2007) says in an interview,

The idea for *Blissfully Yours* was inspired by an incident that occurred in 1998 while I was shooting my previous film at a downtown zoo in Bangkok. A policeman handcuffed two teenage women and threw them into a police car. I eventually learned that they were illegal Burmese immigrants. This was not an uncommon incident. It is an aspect of living in Thailand that many people face. However, even with all the uncertainty and hardship they have to endure, their lives cannot be completely in the dark. There must be some light passing through, no matter how imperceptible to others. Did the Burmese women enjoy the zoo as much as the other people there, before they were captured that afternoon? This question was the inspiration for *Blissfully Yours* – the idea of moments of happiness existing in an oppressive environment, the idea of the coexistence of lightness and darkness, of pleasure and suffering. So I have cast the sun as my main character in this film. It is the primary source of energy for life, and at the same time, of destruction. It affects all the individuals in the story (a man’s mysterious sunburn, the relentless heat), and can be viewed as an invisible oppressive force around this area on the Thai-Burmese border. The second character is the jungle, which confines the protagonists despite their desire to find freedom there. In this story, I have chosen not to dwell on the political issues of the Thai-Burmese border, but to focus on mundane and futile activities, which in themselves carry an underlying political message.



Even though the film does not deliver a political message in obvious way, his statement reveals how non-political everyday activities in the film hold political message of illegal Burmese immigrant issue as well as his sympathy for a Burmese immigrant, who is a person just like a Thai citizen enjoying the zoo.

On the other hand, a short documentary film, *Admit*, was in the documentary film competition in the 11<sup>th</sup> Thai short film and video festival. The film portrays a Burmese laborer in Thailand who is hospitalized for an accident. Both movies tell that Burmese, especially those who live in Thailand, also have their own private life, which many Thais are usually not interested in. For the filmmakers, the Burmese are not the enemy of nation, but unfortunate residents in the kingdom. Even though both films never directly insist on their position toward the Burmese, the films seem to speak for them. In terms of Burma as un-Thainess and the enemy of the nation, the films hold quite different sentiment.

#### **4.4.3 Representing Non-Buddhists: *Khaek* (In-between, Panu Aree, 2006), *Mariya* (Mariya, Kanin Koonsumitrawong, 2006), *Mae Phuangmalai* (The Jasmine in Pattani, Weangkwan Prasongmaninil, 2007)**

Panu Aree, himself a Muslim Bangkokian and filmmaker, expresses the life of Muslims in Bangkok in *Khaek*. As Thongchai (1994) says, *khaek* is a typical term expressing un-Thainess, even though there are many *khaek* with Thai citizenship. The film shows the daily life of four Muslim residents in Bangkok, which lets audience notice the existence of them in this Buddhist-dominant country. In an interview, Panu says, “I did In Between because I myself feel how the line has been drawn in society – in the world... After listening to what the subjects in my movie say, I realize that more or less those are the same things I want to say.” (Panu in Kong, 2006c).

While a short fiction movie made by a film-major student, a winner in the 10<sup>th</sup> Thai short film and video festival, *Mariya* tells of the difficulty of friendship and romantic relationship between a Buddhist boy and a Muslim girl over the political issue of the country’s southern violence reportedly by Muslim separatists. This naïve, but serious approach, to the complicated political issue is what the mainstream cinema has

never done. The 11<sup>th</sup> Thai short film and video festival in 2007 also witnessed a short documentary work called *Mae Phuangmalai* on southern Thai Muslims who make a living selling Buddhist garlands. Even though it is the second biggest religious group in Thailand, it is almost impossible to find Muslim-theme films in recent commercial Thai cinema, and Muslim-theme films have become a subject of independent filmmakers.

#### 4.4.4 Co-production: Global but Un-Thai

One of the talented independent filmmakers' tactics is co-production with non-Thai producers. Escaping from domestic mainstream commercialism, and with their aesthetical acceptance by Western cinephiles, many works by independent filmmakers such as of Apichatpong or Pen-ek are supported by non-Thai production companies from France, Germany, Italy or anywhere their works are appreciated. This trend in the independent films makes Thainess blurred and difficult to tell what is really Thai cinema, which confuses the congregation of Thai identity. The controversy arose when the Federation of National Film Associations of Thailand replaced *Khamphiphaksa Khong Mahasamut* of Pen-ek, once announced as Thailand's representation for Best Foreign Language Film entry for the 79th Academy Awards, to *Ahingsa Chikko Mi Kam* (*Ahinsa ... Stop to Run*, Kittikorn Kiasirikun, 2005). The excuse by the Film Federation was a delay in transporting the film print and unavailability for the Academy, which was denied by the producers and distributors of *Khamphiphaksa Khong Mahasamut*. Instead, it is said that the Federation thought the film was not truly Thai because of its co-production, and it was known from the episode that earlier the Federation opposed to screen it for the opening of Bangkok International Film Festival 2006<sup>8</sup>. *Khamphiphaksa Khong Mahasamut* was directed by Thai filmmaker Pen-ek Ratanaruang but starred a Japanese actor and a Korean actress and shot in Macau and Phuket, which lacked "Amazing-Thailand" style Thainess, and it seems unqualified to be an official and national representation for the Federation of National Film Associations of Thailand.

Even though independent filmmakers are not challenging the notion of Thainess

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<sup>8</sup> This incident was also mentioned in the panel discussion on co-production in 2007's Bangkok International Film Festival.

by co-production style, transnational filmmaking brings the Thainess-promoters a dilemma, especially because the filmmakers such as Pen-ek and Apichatpong are internationally well-known and successful Thai auteurs. 2007's Bangkok International Film Festival held a panel discussion session on co-production, inviting American and Asian (from Japan, Korean, and Hong Kong) producers as well as Thais. In the session, Hong Kong-based producer Peter Chan (2007), who also produces some Thai films, mentioned that co-production was one strategy for Asian film industry to survive. He said that recently the film industry witnessed either big-budgeted spectacular movies with national support or small funded films by film production companies. While films on official Thainess, such as *Suriyothai* or Naresuan series, receive domestic funding relatively easily, for the independent cinema on un-Thainess, it may be necessary to find supports from foreign producers.

#### 4.4.5 Challenges Against Thainess in Contemporary Thai Arts

Being a video art rather than an independent film, well-known contemporary Thai artist, Navin Rawanchaikul has expressed his *khaek*-ness, or being Indian-originated Thai, in his project "Navins of Bollywood", a 10-minute video artwork. As explained in the beginning of this chapter, *khaek* is a typical expression of un-Thainess.

Created in Bollywood style musical video, Navin himself looks for a man called Navin and traveled in India, which sharply reflects issues of diaspora and ethnic identity. Although the video shows no direct mention of Thai ways of looking at others within the country, Navin answers to an interview by Bangkok post newspaper,

I live in Thailand, but my family is Indian. I was born here and grew up here. Most of my relatives are here. I'm Indian, but sort of not. I'm Thai, but sort of not, either. I have a Thai passport, but if people just look at me, they won't think I'm Thai. This is the kind of experience I've had since I was a child. (Navin in Amrand, 2006)

His position as a *khaek* seems to have influence on his artwork and his identity.



Figure 4.4: Poster of “Navins of Bollywood” exhibition.

Source: Picture with an invitation e-mail sent to the author.

Copyright: Navin Rawanchaikul

Thai contemporary artists give a message on recent nationalistic sentiment. In the exhibition “Neo-Nationalism” of 2005 at Chulalongkorn University Art Center, a curator and artist Manit Sriwanichpoom, whose pink-man series are famous internationally as well, says,

We live in interesting times. Globalisation, as practiced by transnational capitalists, relentlessly expands its empire and overwhelms local economies. The War on Terror, as waged by the leaders of the United States of America, along with suicide bombing by international terrorists, spreads like an epidemic across the world. In the three troubled Southern provinces of Thailand, innocent lives are being sacrificed in daily acts of violence. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai Party have become all-powerful as they adopt a CEO administrative style and pursue a neo-nationalist agenda; as the battle rages between this representative of Thai capitalist interests and royalist conservatives over the people’s hearts and minds (Manit in the Art Center of Chulalongkorn University, 2005)

Addressing the issues of globalization and Thai nationalism under the Thai Rak Thai government at the time, the exhibition demonstrated works using motifs of Thai national flag colors, and questioned the neo-nationalism by Thai elites. Another artist in the exhibition Vasan Sitthiket comments,

I want to give us pause. I want to say: please, I don't want to be a nationalist like you, if nationalism means having to be narrow-minded, prejudiced or hateful towards people who think differently... How can we be more accepting of our differences? [Our ability to co-exist]—this is the thing that speaks of culture and civilisation. We should be seeking to become more civilised and develop human wisdom. Our rulers shouldn't be working to keep people ignorant and docile and easy to exploit for the rulers' own selfish interests. (Vasan in the Art Center of Chulalongkorn University, 2005)

The contemporary artists are more directly responding to the political trend.

Pandit's dissertation (2006) on Thai national imaginary in contemporary Thai art found the relation between the dominance of neo-traditionalist movement and Thai official national imaginary based on nation-religion-monarchy, exemplifying works of Chalermchai Kositpipat. Mentioning neo-traditionalism or neo-Buddhist art of Chalermchai becoming a symbol of authentic Thai art, Pandit (2006) says that new riches and middle class search and consume Thainess through the neo-traditional arts. Meanwhile he analyzes artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Navin Rawanchaikul and Araya Rasdjarnrearnsook who disagree with the idea of neo-traditional arts saying, "a new type of Thai artists seeks to exceed her/his national boundaries and the national imaginary by using artistic imaginaries to challenge both the Western gaze and the Thai gaze. Artists thereby designate a new form of expression beyond ethnic and national identity"(Pandit 2006:77). His examples include *Phad Thai*, Thai fried noodles, as an artwork made by overseas Thai Rirkrit, or Montien Boonma's Buddhist concept art without Buddhist iconography, which is different from neo-traditional style.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

Thailand held a nationalistic sentiment in its politics after the financial crisis. Correspondingly, this chapter examined cultural nationalism through Thai cinema after the crisis. The series of Thai commercial cinema starts from *Bangrajan* of the year of 2000, when three years passed since the crisis. It is probably because film production takes such a long time, as *Suriyothai* is said to take three years for both shooting and post-production, that is, the plan of *Suriyothai* must start from around 1998. Anchalee (2004a) reveals that film distributor Film Bangkok intentionally released *Bangrajan* during the time the country was facing the tension just before the national election and consequently it became a hope for the people. Three years is probably long enough for

people to recover from the economic crisis, however the globalization, which was thought as the cause of the disaster, is still an on-going process and unavoidable. Therefore, Thais might feel insecure. This study analyzes these series of films as the response of Thai filmmakers and moviegoers toward the narrative of globalization; it contains four characteristics.

Firstly, it reflects popular nationalism except *Suriyothai*, as that film received sizable royal support, and should be categorized as elite nationalism rather than popular nationalism. The series of mainstream films starting from *Bangrajan* apparently emphasize Thainess, by expressing hostility against un-Thainess, or a bilateral structure between an antagonist and a defender of Thainess. The commercial success of *Bangrajan* and *Suriyothai* as an example of popular and elite nationalism discussed in Lewis (2003), became a trigger to generate a series of movies with similar taste. There seems to not be much new creation of Thainess by filmmakers but rather ia recycle of Thainess that has been framed by elites of the country with using un-Thainess such as Burma, the West, Thai foreign heads who tag along with the West, or any opponents against the nation, religion (Buddhism) or monarchy.

Secondly, post-crisis Thai cinema faces in two ways; nostalgia and nationalism. As Anchalee (2004a) pointed out, a characteristic of post-crisis Thai cinema was its nostalgia that people need to rely on. On one hand, Thais are looking at the past, unchangeable good old days under the present unpredictable political turbulences and it reflects in Thai cinema with nostalgia. On the other hand, under the present unpreventable Western influence in the globalization era, Thai cinema reflects nationalistic sentiment by portraying Thainess with negative identification, a classic method of Thainess-maker. As Reynolds's example (1998) of academic trend of ethnic Tai, Thai cinema also has been searching for yet-to-be-globalized subject.

Thirdly, with the popularity of Thai cinema in the international market, Thainess-featuring cinema is now becoming a target of global consumerism. In other words, looking back (at Thai national identity built up the nation-building era) makes Thais look ahead. Undoubtedly, filmmakers are intelligent enough to be aware of how to use the negative identification in their films. The internationally and commercially welcomed movies such as *Ong-bak* and *Tom Yum Goong* use non-Thai nationals as

un-Thainess or an enemy of Thainess but the films depict them as the punishable objects, such as robbers of Buddha head or smugglers of sacred elephants, that is, they are blameworthy figures. *Bangrajan* and *Suriyothai*, on the other hand, went abroad but did not enjoy as much success as the former. Perhaps it is attributed to the usage of negative identification, which is accepted only by a majority of Thais. For the international audience, Burma is not an enemy because they do not share the same historiography with Thais. With the same reason, *Koet Ma Lui* and *Homrong* have done well internationally, but *7Prachanban* series has stayed in the domestic market. Historical negative identification cinema finds difficulty in traveling abroad.

Contrarily, Thai independent films challenge the trend of mainstream movies' subjectivities. While mainstream films focus on amazing Thainess and promote it to on an international stage, independent filmmakers look at another side of Thainess. Their subjectivities are perceived as un-Thai or non-Thai, however it reflects the reality in Thailand. Burmese immigrant is not a subject of Thai mainstream cinema although they are real in Thailand. For Thai Muslims, being a Thai and being a Muslim is compatible and both are most likely important identities for them. However Muslimness is never become official Thainess although they are Thai. In the age of globalization, the new emergent arts show the challenge against nationalistic sentiment of mainstream arts, as well as representing their un-Thai identities or sympathy.

The post-crisis Thai cinema reflects uncertainty of both Thai society, including economy and politics, and Thai identity. This made Thai filmmakers produce nostalgic movie and Thai-pride-featuring cinema with an intense patriotic taste. It is important to know that this popularity of a series of nationalistic movies in Thailand indicates Thai general preferences as well. Even though Thai cinema is not necessarily an offender to other nations, the usage of negative identification to express Thainess, which has been employed by past nationalistic policy in the country, makes it jingoistic. In this sense, the post-crisis cinema utilized the image built by past elites. A series of post-crisis Thai mainstream cinema and its popularity reflects people's answer to the social and identity crisis.

Those who felt threat of identity are not only the majority of Thai citizen but also the minority. The imperative expression of Thai official identity by both state and

business sector, threatened so-called the un-Thai identities existing in the country. As a result, the independent arts scene has become a space for those who are not regarded as official Thai and do not have any ways to express themselves in the mainstream arts scene. In other words, independent film becomes a medium and space for self-presentation of un-Thainess. As a result, these artists and arts become social commentators to question Thai official and popular nationalistic sentiment.



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## CHAPTER V

### THE QUEST FOR *SIWILAI* IN POST-CRISIS THAI CINEMA

We examined the possibilities of popular nationalism in Thai contemporary films in the previous chapter. As some Thais use the terms of imperialism or colonialism to explain the IMF treatment or the economic crisis, the globalization and its influence was and has been a greater impact for Thais. A century ago, one of the most popular kings in Thai history, King Chulalongkorn, faced a similar crisis, that is, the threat of colonization. Thais believe that the great king Chulalongkorn cleverly modernized the country, therefore Siam was able to escape from European imperialism. However, another historical point of view by historian Thongchai Winichakul is that a reluctant choice for modernization made by the king to elude colonialism was actually the quest for *siwilai*; Siamese elites' preference to the West and disdain against the rural. This chapter attempts to examine viewpoints of Thai contemporary filmmakers and their works from a perspective of what Thongchai (2000) calls "The quest for *siwilai*".

The first section reviews the concept of the quest for *siwilai* and others-within proposed by Thongchai (2000). Subsequently, the chapter seeks to analyze how Thai post-crisis mainstream cinema reflects these ideas and demonstrate that the notions become subjects of not only Thai elites but also new riches, including Thai filmmakers and their audience. Finally, some examples of films representing the marginal in the Thai film history and contemporary independent cinema are examined in order to show their challenge against the mainstream subjectivities, and representations of their identities.

#### 5.1 The Quest for *Siwilai* and Others within in the Era of Globalization

This section summarizes the concept of Siamese quest for *siwilai*, advocated by Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul (2000). The concept is applied for my analysis of Thai post-crisis cinema to suggest that the belief has been revived with the treatment of new type of colonization, or globalization.

Thongchai is a Thai revisionist historian who perceives the Thai modernization differently from the conventional Thai standpoint, which was that "the modernization

since the mid-nineteenth century was a necessary measure to save the country by satisfying the Europeans or minimizing the precondition of colonization” and “the brilliant Thai monarchs saved the days” (2000:532). His prospect on the modernization effort is “the quest of *siwilai*” or that Siamese elites voluntarily modernized themselves as their mission, and bulk of them were intensely fond of Westerners and Western things. *Siwilai* is a Thai word originated from English “civilized” but the connotation is not equivalent. Even though there was a word explaining “civilized” in Thai, “*ariya*” or “*araya*” originated from Sanskrit which becomes a formal word in the present use, or “*charoen*” from Khmer etymologically, the term *siwilai* was adopted because of the necessity to express a new concept for Siamese elites to follow. Thongchai emphasizes, “There was no definitively essential quality of *siwilai*. The concept of *siwilai* was always relational, and the relative position of Siam on the civilization scale was conceivable by spatial discourses”(2000:529) and it covers within and without the country.

The quest of the elites included relational views to its interior as well as outside of Siam. Thongchai examines how Siamese upper class eyed inhabitants in distance through travel writings, recordings of excursions to remote areas among urban elites and intellectuals during the 1880s to 1920s. According to the writings, the Siamese elites encountered two types of others; the *chaopa*, literally jungle people or wild people, and the *chaobannok*, rural villagers. The *chaopa* were the people who reside in jungle or mountains, never settle down in one place, and they were characterized as uncivilizable. On the other hand, the *chaobannok* was described as uneducated, backward, loyal folk, and the people were regarded as *chaobannok* no matter what ethnic group they belonged to. As Siamese nobilities considered themselves and Bangkok as the representation of Siam, therefore, Thongchai (2000) says, the *chaopa* and *chaobannok* were considered as “Others Within”.

Meanwhile, the pursuit of *Siwilai* was also noticeable with the perception of Siam elites to the West and the world. Through the World’s Fairs in Western countries during the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Siam was expected to display exotics by the West, contrary to Siam’s intention to show their technology, that is, the representation of more *siwilai* for the Siamese. At the Paris exhibition in 1900, Siam was originally placed among the colonies of imperials, which indicated that Siam was

regarded as Others of Western civilization, and Siam refused it. Internally, on the other hand, a geography textbook for elementary schools reflected another understanding of Siamese elite, which showed barbarism of African, Latin American, American Indian, Australian aboriginals, and Caribbean cannibals. They were typical barbarians in the world for Siamese imaginary. Furthermore, the first Siamese national museum imitated the Imperial Institute in Britain where products of colonial countries were displayed. Instead of colonial goods, Siam exhibited products from the provinces in the country, which meant that the museum was “an imperial museum with Bangkok as the imperial center of those provinces” (Thongchai 2000:543). Interestingly, a historical museum was not a matter until the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century when royal nationalist discourse started to develop, which implies that the quest for *siwilai* was a major concern, more than nation building for the elites in the period. Even though there was not much evidence of how Siamese elites viewed neighboring countries, except Laotian as in-between of *chaopa* and *chaobannok* and, Burma and Vietnam as “the backward, miserable places that fell to colonialism” (Thianwan cited in Thongchai, 2000:545)

The Siamese’s desire for *siwilai* is also observable in the story “From Mr. Jungle to Mr. City” in the elementary textbook, which originated from “Good Citizen” written in 1916. The story, as the title shows, is about the change of one Siamese boy’s identity; a jungle-born boy who becomes a policeman in the city with loyalty to the nation, the religion and the monarchy. The boy was a subject of Bangkok-centered elites.

Thongchai says the Siamese elites “tried to understand and locate their position in the new world order. ... The quest for *siwilai* was a genuine desire to avoid the disgrace of inferiority for being less civilized. ... The quest for *siwilai* was outward looking, yet fundamentally a self confirmation” (2000:546). In other words, *siwilai* is the notion of image that the Siamese elites created, and became a criterion to distinguish one from other.

The relational viewpoint understanding of the world with the notion of *siwilai* is still existent at present. The impact of the western modernization more than a hundred years ago made Siamese re-conceptualize the state of Siam in the new world order. Then, how was the concept shaped in the circumstance after another big foreign impact, the

economic crisis in 1997, which even made some Thais express concepts of imperialism?<sup>1</sup>

The quest of *Siwilai* seems to be not only the subject of King Mongkut (King Rama IV) or Chulalongkorn. With the new hegemonic power of the United States after the Cold War, *siwilai* as industrialization or development and *siwilai* as economic power seems to be the new narrative all over the world. Thailand, one of the countries that enjoyed an economic boom, was following Asian NICs (New Industrial Countries) namely South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Thongchai ends his article saying, “The New Rich in Thailand was scrambling to get to the forefront of globalization or the post-Cold War world order. Like their royal predecessors a century earlier, the spatial concept and strategy were subtly at work, both within and without the country, in order to get the desirable position in the world”(2000:546). This idea seems to be a main narrative again in the 1980s to 1990s when Thailand pursued more *siwilai* countries such as the United States, the West, Japan, and NICs.

This may sound contradictory after possibilities of popular nationalism were analyzed in the previous chapter. How nationalistic sentiment and the quest for *siwilai* are compatible will be also addressed later in this chapter.

## 5.2 Analysis of Contemporary Thai Cinema

### 5.2.1 Drawing the Modernization Era in the Globalization Era: *Homrong* (The Overture, Ittisuntorn Wichailuck, 2004), *Nong Teng Nakleng-Pukaotong* (Nong Teng Nakleng-Pukaotong, Panitch Sodsi, 2006), and *Thawi Phop* (The Siam Renaissance, Surapong Pinitka, 2004)

All the three films here are portraying the era of modernization when Thais meet the West or Western culture. As I scrutinized the movies in the foregoing chapter, Western power is represented as otherness. Interestingly, the main description in these films is the defender of old Thai identity, classic Thai culture (*ranard-ek*, wooden xylophone in *Homrong*, and *likay* play in *Nong Teng Nakleng-Pukaotong*) and the Thai nation as Siam (in *Thawi Phop*), but hatred to the West is not strongly expressed as I explained previously.

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<sup>1</sup> See the beginning of Chapter IV

In *Homrong*, the criticism is against the government that encouraged Western culture and disparaged Thai traditional music, but never the West or Western culture. Rather, the film included a scene of musical collaboration of Thai traditional *ranard-ek* and piano, a symbol of the West. The director replied to a question about the intention of the collaborative session of *ranard-ek* and piano (Figure 5.1) by saying, “We are living in a globalization era, and it is impossible for any country not to be influenced by powerful countries. No matter how much it is, one country has its own culture and the culture of the super powers. This scene symbolizes the co-existence of Eastern culture and Western culture”<sup>2</sup>( Ittisuntorn in Shirata, 2004).



Figure 5.1 Scene of collaborative session of *ranard-ek* and piano Source: *Homrong*.

*Nong Teng Nakleng-Pukaotong*, although it shows binary conflict between Thai and West, expresses another example of co-existence of Eastern and Western culture as *likay* and cinema share the theater in the latter part of the story. At the same time, it is a movie of the birth of Thai movies; therefore a negative portrait of western culture is not expected.

Most likely, *Thawi Phop* opposes the quest for *siwilai* as the heroine holds a much critical sentiment to the westernized future of Thailand. With the quest for *siwilai*,

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<sup>2</sup> Translated by author of this thesis

she must have been proud of the fact of the Siamese future independence and well-modernized status. The interesting point is, however, that she has to use her western education to save her ancestors, as Noy (2005) points out.

"We prefer anything the Westerners want," the heroine explains to her aghast ancestors. "We want to be them and refuse to accept ourselves, we accept all but ourselves." She herself is conflicted, a confused child of Thailand and the West (the actor herself is Thai and Caucasian, a tellingly popular combination for movie stars in Thailand), and ultimately finds refuge from Thailand's modern-day metaphoric colonization in its besieged past. Her flight from the present is a somewhat troubling and myopic prescriptive, only alleviated by the fact that she has used her Western education on things Thai to aid her ancestors.

In spite of the friction between Thainess and Westernness in these three movies on the modernization era produced in globalization time, they never contain derogatory sentiment against Western culture yielded to Thailand. Piano and cinema in the former movies are not a symbol of aggression. Likewise western education is not what they blame, but the way to save the country in the latter film.

**5.2.2 Others-within Movies: *Rak Chang* (The Memory, Hemund Chetamee, 2006), *Sagai United* (Sagai United, Somching Srisuparp, 2004), *Yaem Yasothon* (Hello Yasothorn, Mum Jokmok, 2005), *Noo-Hin the Movie* (Noo-Hin the Movie, Komgris Treewimol, 2006), *Chaao* (M.A.I.D, Youngyooth Thongkonthun, 2004)**

Another aspect of the quest for *siwilai*, the narrative that *Chaopa* and *Chaobannok* are less *siwilai* or what Thongchai calls "others-within", also seems a main discourse in present Thailand. Although the narrative is available in contemporary Thai films, the message of the films are not as straightforward as in the previous century; *Chaopa* is uncivilizable and *Chaobannok* is uneducated and backward.

*Rak Chang* is a love-comedy movie starring two young pop idols, Film and Paula. Film plays the role of himself as a superstar, and Paula, another popular Thai-Caucasian actress, performs as the paparazzi photographer, Ja, who comes to take pictures of the hero in Paai, Northern Thailand. When Film runs away from her, he has a car accident and loses his memory, and then he somehow starts to live with three hill tribe people in the mountains there. This movie has mainly two aspects; romantic love and comedy, and these three hill tribe people are well-done clowns for the comedy part. Their obvious uncivilized-ness is an object for laughter. At the same time, their portrayals as

nice people who treat the singer with temporary amnesia even though they do not recognize him as a super star, are observable as well.

*Sagai United*, which was addressed as a positive identification film in the previous chapter, is actually another movie dealing with *Chaopa*, here forest people in Southern Thailand. The ethnic Sagai in the film are illustrated as barbarians who do not wear shoes, and are welcomed by comedy shows. They are also typical targets of laughter (Figure 5.2). The portrait of the *Chaopa* is, actually, one of the themes of the movie, and the main character, Mamuang, a Sagai soccer player is always wondering why the urban laugh at them. There is one scene in which Mamuang interrogates his ethnic Thai peer Rang, a fan of the Sagai soccer team, “Why do people here always laugh at us?” and his ethnic Thai friend’s answer is “Don’t be so sensitive”. At the end of the film, however, Rang tells the truth to him. In the scene just before the Sagai team goes to a final match of the championship, Rang says to Mamuang, “Do you remember? The question you asked me? Why people here always laugh at you?”, he continues “Because they see you only as clown. Go on. Tell people here that Sagai is as good as them. Tell them that Sagai is not just a clown to them anymore.” The scene is expressed beautifully as representing a friendship between Thai and Sagai. Yet, this is also a typical expression of Thai quest for *siwilai*; Sagai should be as good as Thais in order not to be laughed at, and the way to prove it is to win the championship, implying that if Sagai wins the championship and show they are stronger than Thais, they can be as good as ethnic Thai. The line of Rang presumes that Sagai is inferior or less *siwilai* and has to follow Thais, the more *siwilai* people, in order to avoid ridicule by Thais. Ultimately the Sagai wins the championship and go back to their residence in the Southern forest, somehow as a successful ethnic group.



Figure 5.2. Ethnic Sagai was the target for comedy show in the film. Source: *Sagai United*.

*Yaem Yasothon* is another comedy movie set in northeastern Yasothorn province. It includes a typical setting for Thai soap drama, forbidden love between different classes and gives its audience a predictable ending. Furthermore, the northeastern poor guy, as a main character, makes the viewers feel safe in watching the film, as poor northeasterners are always nice and funny. Undoubtedly the rusticity is an object of amusement.

*Chaeo* and *Noo-hin the Movie* are both the story on housemaids from the countryside, or *bannok*. As both are categorized as comic films, their behavior and language, with strong local color, is always an object for fun. As representative of *bannok*, the northeast Thai, *Isan* woman, is depicted as the heroine, Noo-hin, in *Noo-hin the Movie* and some maids in *Chaeo* come from that area. Even the name of the characters shows the matter of *siwilai* according to the Nation newspaper “Noo Hin’s name in her northeastern dialect suggests a bad smell, and ultimately backwardness, while that of her mistress (whose name is Milk) intimates white skin and modernity” (The Nation, 2005). Skin color is also another criterion of *siwilai*. While Milk, Hoo-hin’s Bangkokian boss, intimates white skin, a comedian in *Sagai United* raises a laugh by questioning “why are



those players so black?’. (Figure 5.2)

The provincialism is repeatedly a popular subject of comedy shows. In *Chaeo*, one of the main character housemaids is an ethnic Karen from Burma who wants to be a Thai citizen because her hometown village is under a battle. Even the scene of the fight in the village is illustrated in a trivial way as a scene in a comic movie, in spite of its seriousness in the real world. *Noo-hin the Movie* is based on the popular comic and as author Padung Kraisri himself is from *Isan* therefore the movie does not humiliate the people of the region but rather it represents the peculiarity of city people from the point of view of the northeastern girl, and the film itself does not hold any feeling of spite to rural people. Similarly four maids in *Chaeo* are chosen as a team of secret agents, and fight with a villain, that is, they are heroines in the movie. But the point is that the funniest part of the film as a comedy is predominantly about their barbarianism. Even though what is said about the rural people in the film is positive, but how to say it is quite evident; they are still objects to laugh at. The barbarianism is an easy choice to amuse the audience.

All the stories above are not seriously scornful, but friendly to the so-called “others-within”, although the description itself contains a slight disdain. I argue that it is because of political correctness that the filmmakers cannot or do not want to make their works humiliating to any people. The theme and purpose of each movie is not to look down on the people but just bring their audience fun, consequently the film is not discriminatory for their understanding. Frequent usage of “others-within” in movies, however, represents the concept of the *siwilai*, which deeply lies in Thai filmmaker’s notion of what is funny and laughable. Comparable insensitivity is available in the movies picturing the neighboring countries of Thailand as well.

### **5.2.3 Portraying Neighboring Countries: *Mak Te Returns* (Lucky Loser, Ardisorn Trisirikasem, 2006), *La - Tha - Phi* (Ghost Game, Sarawuth Wichiansan, 2006)**

Burma has been delineated in various forms, not only in cinema but also textbooks, TV dramas, or theatre plays as seen in the preceding chapter. Burma has been positioned as the enemy of the Thai nation since the nation-building period of the country

beyond the frame of *siwilai*. Meanwhile, Laos and Cambodia have still been applied as a target of Siamese pursuance of *siwilai*.

*Mak Te Returns* is a soccer comedy film, which was supposed to screen just before the opening of FIFA World Cup 2006. There must have been an expectation that it would be successful, with the enthusiastic popularity of soccer and the World Cup games among Thais. The story of the film was that a Thai soccer coach managed a Lao soccer team to take them to the World Cup. However after the premier, just before its release, Lao officials were dissatisfied with the way it characterized Laotians in the movie, reportedly humiliating the people of Laos, and finally it was cancelled for public release. Sorraditthep Supachanya (2006) explains its detail (See figure 5.3 and 5.4 as well),

While the movie supposedly ends with a Laotian victory, the Laotian officials (including the Laotian ambassador to Thailand) are upset that the rest of the story jokes about their countrymen's silly actions and backwardness, such as dyeing underarm hairs blonde for a modernized (i.e. westerner's) look and sitting in a freezing container to familiarize with the cold weather.

Compared to the Others-Within movies above, Thai filmmakers seem to understand that the story itself does matter regarding political correctness, as the story ends with Laotian victory. Sorraditthep (2006) continues,

For this film to be planned, produced, marketed, approved by the censorship board, and ready to be release in three days before its last-minute cancellation as urged by the Laotian diplomats, it simply shows that the Thai people need to be more politically correct. Political correctness demands a conscious effort of self-censorship in any form of action and communication that results in a minimum of offense and a promotion of social diversity.

The film was eventually screened some months later but what they did was modify the country name, from Laos to an imaginary nation Awee although Lao language, which is almost equivalent to the language spoken in Northeastern Thailand, is heard in a major part of the film. A Bangkok-based film critic Kong Rithdee (2006e) questions,

Still I'm genuinely curious: the film has substituted "Laos" with "Awee", but will the Thai audience substitute the word "Awee" with "Laos" as they watch it, since that's what most of us know to be the original story? Are the jokes less offensive now that Laos has become clam-exporting Awee - or more? When we laugh at the film (it's not much of a laugh anyway) do we laugh at the bogus Awee clowns or at the now-you-don't-see-it Lao ones?

With examples of Anna and the King (1999, Andy Tennant) or any versions of

“King and I” and *Memoirs of a Geisha Nang Lom Lok Charuek* (*Memoirs of a Geisha*, Rob Marshall, 2005), Kong explains it as a Hollywood movie syndrome “which a powerful nation can impose its fantasies about other “exotic” countries, while justifying that its actions have the high-minded purpose of celebrating those foreign cultures and peoples” (Kong, 2006e). In the case of Thai cinema, it is not only a matter of powerful “nation” and its fantasy but also powerful “region” in the country, as seen the examples in others-within cinema. As Sorraditthep (2006) points out, the film was approved by the censorship board<sup>3</sup> before the name was changed from Laos to Awee, which indicates that not only the filmmaker, but also Thai authorities, embrace the quest for *siwilai* similar to the ones in the previous century.



Figure 5.3. Scene dyeing underarm hairs blonde for a modernized look is still available. Source: *Mak Te Returns*

<sup>3</sup> Thai censorship board will be mentioned in the chapter VIII as well.



Figure 5.4. Scene sitting in a freezing container to familiarize with the cold weather is still available.  
Source: *Mak Te Returns*

*La - Tha - Phi* is another recipient of official claim in the same year. The horror movie, allegedly using for the plot innocent victims killed by the Khmer Rouge, reveals the insensitivity of Thai filmmaker to historical tragedy in the neighboring country. As a result, the movie run was shortened. At the same time, the public release, even though the run was shortened, means that the Thai censorship board once passed the film to screen without censoring controversial setting. The director of the film answered in an interview just before its release “I don't want to bring back memories of the genocide but rather to impart a feeling of sorrow along with the story” (Sarawuth in Kitchana, 2006). The statement reveals that the director seems to know the atrocities that took place in Cambodia, however, after the Cambodian official claim, all the filmmaker could do was apologize for its insensitivity. The Nation newspaper (2006a), after it became a momentous issue between two kingdoms, reported “Movie producer Tifa Co. had sought the Cambodian government's permission to shoot “Ghost Game” in Cambodia last June but was refused on grounds of cultural insensitivity. That did not stop the company from going ahead and shooting the movie in Thailand without any alteration to the theme or setting”. It shows that they were aware of the probability it would cause a problem, but were not concerned with it. The article concludes “Apology aside, it became obvious that they still wouldn't mind making a lot of money from the movie, to recoup their

investment and to line their pockets. Never mind the insult to the historical memories of the Cambodian people by this thoughtless horror flick in bad taste that panders to the ignorant, culturally insensitive masses”(The Nation, 2006a). The VCD/DVD version of *La - Tha - Phi* was released in September 2006, and the country in the story amended from Cambodia to an imaginary country called Jedah. In the DVD version, the warning stating “The Producers of Ghost Game hereby state that all names, characters, places and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious and should not be identified with actual persons, places, history or events. The Producers also state that no reference is intended, should be made or inferred regarding persons, places or events in this film.” is inserted at the beginning of the film

### 5.3 Representing the Rural

#### 5.3.1 Films Representing the Rural in the 1970s

Once, mainstream Thai cinema as well as popular songs and art, represented the rural and unfortunate in contrast to the present mainstream arts<sup>4</sup>. Not only films, but also various art forms such as literature, fine art, and music, embodied the feeling of the rural in the 1970s as *pua chiwit*, literally for-life, movement<sup>5</sup>.

In particular, the music genre songs-for-life or *pleng pua chiwit*, a product of the student movements in the 1970s, is still a popular part of Thai music songs about rural problems and social injustice. Many of the singers came originally from poor villages in rural areas and migrated to Bangkok for higher education. After the student uprising from 1973 to 1976, as seen in Chapter II, the period witnessed overt political arts including songs, paintings and cinema. It is said that the concept of songs for life was originated by the book “the art for life, the art for people” written by charismatic leftist intellectual writer/poet Jit Phumisak in 1957 (but published later in the 1970s). He was arrested in the same year as a communist and jailed for six years. In 1965, he participated in the Communist Party Thailand and the next year he was killed while fighting for communist guerrillas in 1966.

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<sup>4</sup> Although Anchalee (1998 cited in Sudarat, 2007) says that social realist films in the 1970s to 1980s were not the mainstream and therefore independent.

<sup>5</sup> See chapter II for detail of popular music and art in the 1970s

Since the early 1970s, new progressive and realistic filmmakers appeared with Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol as a leading pioneer. *Khao Chue Kan* (Dr. Karn, 1973) was released in the month leading up to the bloody pro-democracy student uprisings of 1973, and it addressed corruption in Thai society. Even though the director is a member of royal family with Mom Chao prince status, the government was eager to censor the film. However, the film was shown to Field Marshal Thanom and persuaded to release it uncut. Such films as *Thepthida Rongraem* (Hotel Angel, 1974) featured a migrant prostitute in Bangkok, and *Thongphun Khok Pho Ratsadon Tem Khan* (Taxi Driver, 1977), a story of a migrant taxi driver who loses his vehicle, manifested the predicament of the rural people who migrated to the city. *Khru Somsri* (Teacher Somsri) in 1986 not only expressed the exploitation of the poor by a giant capitalist company but also reveals a connection between social justice and the October 6 incident in 1976 while *Thepthida Rongraem* includes a scene of the October 14 student uprising. The director answered a question about the relationship between the socio-political changes and filmic works in the 1970s:

Well, you see, at the time, we had freedom. Actually it was the first time we could make a film like this, beyond of the censor. When I made “Dr. Karn”, I used my power to make it possible, because it was the first one to talk about corruption. It is something that had never been done before. And when I made “Theptida Rongraem” after the October 14, there was a lot of freedom. But after the October 6, my films went back to a sort of comedy, I think... and up to now, I make a new type of film again. (Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol in Yoon, 2003:142)

Until *Siadai 1* (Daughter 1) about highschool girls addicted to drugs in 1995, and *Siadai 2* (Daughter 2) about the social attitude toward a girl infected with HIV through a blood transfusion in 1996, he had shot numerous socially-oriented films. However recent three movies, *Suriyothai*, *Tamnan Somdet Phra Naresuan Maha Rat Phak Ong Prakan Hong Sa*, and *Tamnan Somdet Phra Naresuan Maha Rat Phak Prakat Isonphap* hold quite a different taste, as examined in the previous chapter.

A film called *Tongpan* (Tongpan, Euthana Mukdasanit and Surachai Jantimatorn, 1977) was one of the most progressive films at that time, and was banned for a long time. The film was finally released in 2006. *Tongpan* is a story of a poor Northeastern man who was in a quandary between his poverty and the social justice. Made by amateur team with foreigners, Thai professors and students, the main character Thongpan was played by an

amateur actor from northeastern Thailand. One of the two directors was Surachai, a main singer of Caravan band who played an important role among song-for-life musicians at the time. The film was shot just before the 1976's student massacre, and was based on the real personage, Tongpan, a poverty-stricken Northerner who faced his real pauperdom and the condemnation brought by students over the dam construction in his residential area. After the coup in 1976, the film was banned as a communist work, and many of those in the film production fled abroad, or went to the jungle. The producer of *Tongpan*, Pajon Laisakul, says in an interview about the message of this film;

At the time, we thought, a lot of government development-projects didn't benefit the poor... we wanted to say something... to call to look at the poor ... also we were against the dams ... Building dams ... the ecological sustainability... you remember Tongpan is trying to catch fish with his son. In Kalasin, when they built the dam, they didn't cut all the tree, so a lot of trees were underneath which made the water bad. (Pajon in Yoon, 2003:142)

The socially engaged films concerned with the rural in the period are numerous. For example, Vichit Kounavudhi, enjoyed box-office success with his *Khon Phukhao* (Mountain People) in 1979, the life of hill tribe people in Thailand, and *Luk Isan* (Northeastern Son) about the life of northeastern villagers adapted from a best-selling novel in 1982. *Khru Bannok* (The Rural Teacher) of Surasee Patham in 1978 is another popular film depicting a youth who left his university life to teach poor children in northeastern Thailand. Northeastern Thailand often represented as impoverished.

Euthana Mukdasanit was another filmmaker in the political turbulent period. He was from Thammasat University where he studied journalism and acting, and was known as an artist in political theatre during the rise of the student movement. Among his films-for-life, *Thepthida Bar 21* (The Angel of Bar 21, 1978) is widely known. It is noteworthy that the director won the best film award from the Hawaii International Film Festival for *Phisuea Lae Dokmai* (Butterfly And Flower, 1985) depicting poor rural children from a Muslim family in Southern Thailand, who engaged in smuggling in a border town to Malaysia.

On the other hand, the portrayal of the rural in present Thai cinema is still a popular theme, but the way they are characterized on screen is utterly different. As examined in the previous sections, they are inevitably portrayed in Thai comedy films.

### 5.3.2 Transition of Thai Films from 1970s-80s to the Present

As seen above, the filmic theme by Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol shows the transition of his subject. At the beginning of his career as a filmmaker, educated in the United States with politically active anti-Vietnam War feelings, he was reasonably sensitive with the exploited in Thai society. He has been shooting social movies for a long period, but, as seen in *Siadai 1* and *Siadai 2* in 1990s, the topics were acutely significant for Thai society, both drug-addicted and HIV-infected youth are not necessary the poor or unfortunate in the society. The victims of these two successful movies are middle class teenage girls. As Anchalee Chaiworaporn (2001) points out, “His works are, like those of other Thai ‘modernist’ filmmakers, mainly just a societal reflection”. If society shifts, his theme probably sees its transition as well.

In this sense, the motive of the recent two series on Thai royal historical films is reasonable. In the era of globalization, Thai national identity has faced a serious threat, seen in the previous chapter, and it has been a great social concern. Accordingly, the director shot the film of Thai national pride using Thai national hero and heroine. Even though it is said that the initiator of *Suriyothai* was Queen Sirikit (Amporn, 2003), his stance as a social reflection explains the transition of his subjects from the 1970s to the present.

Comparatively, the representation of the rural has changed. Since the films-for-life movement paralleled the songs-for-life and the literature-for-life based on the spirit of the student campaign in the 1970s, a sundry of films portrayed the fate of the needy and exploited rural people. In contrast what we encounter in current mainstream cinema are dull harmless and affable people.

### 5.3.3 Dilemma of *Siwilai* in Globalization Era

Even though more than one hundred years has passed since the Siamese elites’ quest for *siwilai* at the start of the modernization period, present Thailand holds similar sentiment. *Siwilai* states Siam followed were the West, mainly Britain and France, who colonized her neighboring countries in the previous century, and now it has changed with the new world order and the rise of new economic powers such as the United States or Japan. However, as Thais calls Caucasian as *farang* and Europe is another financially



affluent area, the distinction between American and European is probably not so crucial in the sense of *siwilai*. Rather, the continuous hegemony in the world by *farang* countries perhaps makes them convince that the West is more *siwilai*. Post-crisis cinema reveals the sentiment of nationalism by using a conflict plot between Thainess and un-Thainess, as examined in the last chapter. Yet symbols of Western culture such piano, cinema or education in the modernization period hardly become a target against Thainess, despite people's uneasiness with the foreign impact caused by globalization, as another threat of colonization as the Siamese elites faced in a century ago. This is probably because these cultural symbols are not recognized as strongly Western anymore at the present since they spread all over the world and also have been appreciated by Thais for a long time. Still, in the context of the films portraying the era of modernization, these can be typically regarded as Western cultural symbols. The three movies on Siamese modernization imply the dilemma of Thais; the quest for *siwilai* and the concern over Western influence in a globalization era. Rather, Thai elites' relational world order to the West can be seen in its narcissistic comments to Thainess by the Westerns, such as the usages of American directors, Francis Coppola, Oliver Stone, and Quentin Tarantino, to promote official-Thai movies, or let Miss Universe say *sawadii*. Now, Thai elites may recognize Thai culture more *siwilai* than Western culture, or they believe that letting the more-*siwilai* celebrities praise Thainess makes Thai culture look lofty.<sup>6</sup>

Another dilemma concerning *siwilai* in Thai cinema is noticeable in the representation of others-within and neighboring countries that Thais have judged less *siwilai*. The belief is widely ingrained in many filmic works, but Thai filmmakers know that blatant representation is politically incorrect, or conceivably they are simply naive on the representation. Some directors characterize the people habitually as pleasant humorous folks from their viewpoint, but this often results in humiliating the people.

As Thainess can be identified by a definition of what is not Thainess, the idea of an 'us-them' sentiment is strong even within the kingdom. In the last century, Siamese elites exercised this identification with the notion of *siwilai* whether modernized or not, and the *Chaopa* (forest people) and *Chaobannok* (rural people) were considered as others for the elites. A difference between the last and the current century is what constitutes

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<sup>6</sup> See chapter IV section 4.3 for details.

*siwilai*; the technology and armed power in the imperialist world versus the economic power in the current capitalist society. Therefore, foreign financial dominion was considered a threat in the globalization era, particularly after the monetary hazard in 1997. This complicated situation perhaps brought Thais the dilemma toward a quest for *siwilai* and Thai identity crisis.

After almost ten years since the fiscal crisis, Thailand seems to have achieved complete recovery from the economic recession, and its prosperity in recent years appears to recall a quest for *siwilai* once again. The completion of the Siam Paragon shopping center, with the catchphrase “the pride of Bangkok” was celebrated by middle class Bangkokians boasting “the biggest luxury shopping mall in the Southeast Asia” in December 2005. Analogously, the opening of Suvarnabhumi airport was cited as “the pride of Thai Nation”(BOI, 2005). The question is why Thais need to carry a fierce pride. Why are Thais desperate for the supremacy in the region? Possibly, with the notion of *siwilai*, they yearn to prove and insist that they have survived from the financial crisis or neo-colonialism as their great ancestors did from imperial powers.

The rapid economic growth, however, divided Thai people into two, the new rich and the poor. Interestingly the division overlaps that of the modernization period; Siamese elites and others-within. While the new rich and newly born middle class enjoy capitalistic hegemonic role in the country, recent Thai politics witnesses a similar disunity such that Bangkokians protested against former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his populist policies, in spite of him being in favor in the North and Northeastern rural area. His attitude toward the Muslims in South, hill tribe people in North, and the poor mostly in North and Northeast made the politics more complicated though.

In the dissertation on spectatorship of Thai heritage films since 1997, May Adadol (2007:20) “demonstrates how the category of the heritage film was mobilized by industrial film producers and multiplex exhibitors in effort to woo middle class consumers to attend and endorse Thai films at these newly gentrified cinemas”. The economic power of new rich in Thailand as an audience influences the entity of contemporary Thai films.

### 5.3.4 Indie Boom and Art-for-life Movement

As previously examined regarding the boom of indie in Thailand in chapter III, the importance of the trend is that indie culture represents an anti-conformist position, independent from the mainstream, which, in its present condition, represents a capitalist industrialized cultural scene.

DIY emphasizes the importance of what they express, but not how much they can earn. In this sense, its spirit is against capitalism which has prevailed in Thai society after the decline of communism and the rise of the economic growth in the country. Incontrovertibly, it does not designate that DIY spirit is equivalent to Socialist or Communist thoughts, once intensely disputed through the 1970s. Indie or DIY is not, or not yet, politicized popular culture movement vis-à-vis the arts-for-life movement in the 1970s, but rather a counter-culture against the mainstream culture. Nevertheless, it is natural that some of the indie works hold the sense of representing the rural corresponding to the spirit of the 1970s student movement.

### 5.3.5 Representing the Marginal in Indie Films

As examined in the previous chapter, Apichatpong's works look more at the rural. In an interview with a western journalist, the director, as a Northeastern grown-up, mentions, "In Thailand there is a hierarchy. The Bangkok people look down on the *Isan* people, and *Isan* people in town look down on people from the countryside" (Apichatpong in Stone, 2002 cited from May Adadol and MacDonald, 2006). Having grown up in Northeastern Thailand has likely influenced his filmmaking in some extent. May Adadol and MacDonald (2006:260) states, "What is perhaps most significant about *Blissfully Yours*, especially when we place it in the context of Thai film history, is that it has substantially reworked the tropes of marginality and class or ethnic othering in mainstream Thai filmic and literary traditions". His films view the otherness in Thailand as the main.

Another young independent filmmaker, Urupong Raksasat, is a native of Chiang Rai, in Northern Thailand. His documentary film *Rueang Lao Chak Mueang Nuea* (Stories from the North, 2006) represents the life of villagers in northern Thailand, or "the memory of a fast-disappearing farming society and people in the north", which the

director calls “his happiness” in an interview with the Bangkok-based film critics (Kong 2006e). The film went to some international film festival screenings, contrary to less publicity in his home country. Kong (2006e), a film critics of the English-language newspaper Bangkok Post, calls him the self-sufficiency filmmaker and evaluates the film,

In a period when Thai movies are more and more ingrained with middle-class sensibilities, either in the form of teen-oriented commercial packaging or urban indie swagger, and when it seems that Bangkok boys (and some girls) solely represent the new wave of aspiring filmmakers - Urupong's regionalism and bucolic sensitivity testify to the idea of filmmaking at its purest, cheapest, and most personal....Hardly since the 1970s have Thai filmmakers approached their art from a non-Bangkok point of view. If local wisdom is the kernel of OTOP<sup>7</sup> products, grassroots filmmaking should be included in the campaign too - and Urupong's work could best serve as the prototype of self-sufficiency moviemaking. Born to a farming family in the district of Terng, 60 kilometres from Chiang Rai, Urupong developed a passion for still photography in high-school and came to the capital for the first time when he was 18, after having secured a place at Thammasat's Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communications.

His new documentary film, screened at the 11<sup>th</sup> Thai short film and video festival in 2007, is called *Khaeng Bangfai (The Rocket, 2006)*, which portrayed a bamboo rocket competition in a rural area. Without any voice-over, the film seems to attempt to engrave the enjoyment of his people in his memory.

The direct, or indirect, messages in terms of the marginal by the independent filmmakers are seen in the works shown in the annual short film festivals of 2007. *Kan Khrang Nueng Kon Sin Chat (Extinct, Kunwee Jundee, 2006)* shows the life of indigenous Moken people, the ethnic minority living in islands of Andaman Sea, who are noticed after the 2005 Tsunami disaster, since they realized the change of sea and escaped from the calamity. The film does not give its audience any strong messages, but its synopsis as written in the catalogue of the festival is rather explicit as the filmmaker's message, says,

The journey to find some nation which we used to know from some books or government's document, They have their own way of life. But what do they do in the age of globalization? How will their identity change? And what about the future of their nation? (Thai Film Foundation, 2007:64)

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<sup>7</sup> OTOP (One Tambon One Product) was a local entrepreneurship stimulus program designed by Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra during the 2001-2006 Thai Rak Thai government. The program aimed to support the unique locally made and marketed products of each Thai tambon (village). (wikipedia)

The Moken were a popular subject in the 2007 short film festival, as another work, *Moken pa? (Moken, right?)*, Phisan Sangjan, Taryart Datsathean, and Nattawit Kaosri, (2007) will be presented in the next chapter.

Some of the indie films have political messages as once films-for-life did in thirty years ago. At the end of year 2006, there was a screening event of silent films by Thai independent filmmakers called “Spoken Silence”. Five short silent films were the reaction of the silence after the September coup in the same year, which most of Thais viewed either favorable or just kept quiet from criticizing at the time. One of the works, *Chotmai Chak Khwam Ngiap (Letter from Silence)*, Prap Bunpan (2006), just projected two pages of letter without any sound, explaining that little voices from many little people was suppressed under the martial law after the coup d’etat (Thai Film Foundation, 2006a). As Giles Ungpakorn (2007) criticizes the September coup of 2006 as a coup for the rich from the perspective of class struggle, the explanation of little people reminds one of political sentiment in the 1970s, when the poor and the vulnerable were the subject of politics and arts. Not as radically as before but seemingly the spirit of October exists among some young Thai independent artists.

The program “Spoken Silence” was screened again at the 11<sup>th</sup> Thai short film festival in 2007 as one of the special programs. Adding five more short films with political sentiments, whose program says, “We are only voiceless voices to urge the authority that is suppressing our rights and freedom” (Thai Film Foundation, 2007:84), the films exhibit the voice of peripherals in the country.

Unquestionably, present indie artists are never identical to those who engaged in arts-for-life movement in the 1970s. Some of the indie works go behind the mainstream or lose the original spirit of independence. Subculture is derived from the response to mainstream popular culture as hegemony. As explained in the chapter III, the indie music is already in the system of mainstream capitalists. A personal communication with Chalida Uabumrungjit (2006) of the Thai Film Foundation reveals her worries over the indie filmmaking’s popularity. The upsurge of indie films consequently produced interesting and critical filmmakers who are hard to find in industrial mainstream film production, but at the same time she encountered some films supposedly made by fashion

or trend, that is, lack in theme or message but stick in its appearance. At present the indie movement may reach to a different stage. Some of them are devoted to indie because it looks ‘cool’ without an anti-conformity position.

The conversion is not solely the tendency in Thailand. An article of CNN (Andrews, 2006) shows a dissent of indie interpretation; Eugene Hernandez, editor-in-chief of indieWIRE says the only definition of indie was DIY, while Ryan Schreiber, the editor and founder of Pitchfork Media, notes the definition embodies a sense of idealism and an anti-corporate attitude as well. The sense of indie now evolves, and the article continues, “According to critics, indie is now nothing more than a branding tool: a highly commercial and money-driven movement, more concerned with marketing a particular image instead of culture with a truly independent nature and passion for its art.” Some phenomena in Thailand implicate indie as being commodified just the same as grunge or punk. The difference of indie from these previous cultural trends such as grunge or punk, is that they hold no particular style, for example, indie music can be rock, punk or hip-hop, or indie film can be experimental, documentary, love-comedy, as long as they hold the sense of DIY. Sudarat Musikawong (2007:258) concludes her article on Thai independent cinema, “Thai independent films and Do-It-Yourself video are indeed exemplary of the productive tensions between ‘independent’ aesthetics and economic practices telling the stories of new modern Thai subjectivities”. The indie boom of popular culture has produced critical artists who hold or sympathize with the others-within, and emphasize independence from the mainstream ruling class oriented arts or popular culture. As the capitalistic industry found the advantage of marketing indie, the boom already constitutes a part of industrial system, and indie artists seem to face a tension between their aesthetics and commercialism.

#### 5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, two types of contemporary Thai cinema have been examined; mainstream movies reflecting Siamese quest for *siwilai*, and independent films representing the marginal. Thailand’s appreciation of the arts to express the impoverished or unfortunate was triggered by the student uprising of 1973 when “it was the first time that the *pu-noi* (little people) had actually started a revolution from below”(Giles,

2007:73). Even though the revolution in 1932 changed Siamese political system from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, the power went to the military elites, not the people, however, the arts-for-life campaign brought the people into Thai society's attention, and represented the life of people who are penniless, rustic, and wretched, those who had been Thai elites' subject as others-within for a long time. The student massacre and the military coup in 1976 placed the power in the hands of the elites again in the name of anti-Communism. Thereafter, the country experienced rapid economic expansion from the 1980s onward, and some have achieved successful capitalist positions and a lot of middle class people were born with the economic growth especially in the highly centralized and developed capital city, Bangkok. Contemporary Thai mainstream movies imply the transition of its spectatorship to dominant new riches expressing their new subject, others-within people, and their dilemma over their subjects. Recent political turbulence has highlighted and complicated the distinction between the rich and the poor, and some anti-conformity independent artists represent the peripheral sympathetically. But the indie is not, or not yet, a politicized art movement as the art-for-life movement in the 1970s. The art-for-life movement was directly linked with the political movement and the ideology of the time, and many of the artists were originally from the rural area.

On the other hand, independent artists, who question the system of capitalism, or mainstream commercialism, are not necessarily the poor or the rural. As analyzed in the chapter III, they are aesthetically challenging the capitalistic arts by applying DIY, doing it yourself. Even some independent film works with political message, like those in "Spoken Silence", are not necessarily linked with the ideology in the art-for-life movement. Rather, they are against the dominant order, the military coup in the case of "Spoken Silence" program. Surely, some of the artists are likely to convey political ideology, however, as long as it is not linked with any political movements, it may be difficult to call a movement. The study, rather, looks at these independent films as a kind of identity politics but not radicalized.

The filmmakers who portray the rural differently from the mainstream cinema, such as Apichatpong and Uruphong, are originally from the rural area. For them, the rural is one of their identities. The study also pointed out the similarity on *khaek* in the previous chapter. Even though some artists are not originally the peripheral, their art

works on the Moken, Muslims in the previous chapter, or the poor in “Spoken Silence” program, reveals their sympathy for them.

Although they are not politicized and radicalized, there are some possibilities of a new art movement with alternative styles emerging from independent adherents who are fatigued with capitalistic arts and interested in expressing political message in terms of identity politics. It may evolve from a trend to a movement unless the commercial cultural industry completely takes the indie over, like the 1976 coups took the art-for-life movement over.



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## CHAPTER VI

### THE EMERGENCE OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY THAI CINEMA

Is Thailand a gay paradise? Peter Jackson (1999:226) questioned such a reference as represented in the *Spartacus 1980 International Gay Guide for Gay Men* (Stamford, 1980:502 cited in Jackson, 1999:226),

Thailand is a gay and tourist paradise ... it offers the finest sight-seeing in Asia, and with such warm, friendly, happy people and such handsome young men, it is a Mecca for gays ... Thais do not use the artificial Western way of putting us all into classifications like "gay" or "straight". The most heterosexual young man may readily make love with you if he likes you.

Furthermore the visibility of *kathoey*, transgender people, everywhere in the city of Bangkok probably makes this myth look apt one. Jackson (2003:17) mentions,

Alongside radiant Buddhist temples, tropical island beaches, delicious food, and manifold pleasures of the flesh, the transgender *kathoey* has become one of the international icons of Thailand and the country has become known as an international center of gender-bending sex-change operations and all varieties of cosmetic surgery.

In addition to the high visibility of transgender, multitudinous nightspots such as gay bars, male sexual massage parlors, or even male prostitutes are exposed to the eyes of foreign tourists and residents in the country, and these sexual services are often believed to target mainly male homosexual customers, not female ones. The spectacular transsexual shows have now become a must-go place for tourists to the kingdom, and this probably makes tourists easily think of Thailand as the country full of beautiful transsexuals. Furthermore internationally successful films like *Satri Lek (Iron ladies, Yongyooth Thongkonthun, 2000)* and *Beautiful Boxer (Beautiful Boxer, Eakkachai Aueklongdhram, 2003)* may promote the image. Such descriptions and experiences engender the myth: the kingdom as a gay paradise. Contrarily, Jackson (1999) demonstrated that the country was not a heaven at all, but rather Thai society tolerated homosexuality.

Dennis Altman (1996) proposed the internationalization of gay identity, explaining the emergence of worldwide homosexuality, and it seems to describe the

relation between globalization and homosexuality in Thailand. However Jackson (1999) have challenged the global queering, and represents that homosexuality has developed uniquely in Thailand.

First of all, this chapter examines how homosexuality in Thailand is actually stigmatized in spite of its image by looking at etymological and historical studies on Thai homosexuals. Secondly, the study looks at the concept of Thai regime of image, which has been Thai hegemony of the gender and sexuality notion, and disparages homosexuality. Finally the emergence of queer cinema in both mainstream and independent Thai cinema will be presented, to investigate how independent artists challenge both the Thai regime of image and the portrayal by mainstream arts on gender and homosexuality.

### **6.1 Etymology of Homosexual Terms**

Queer language is significant in terms of how non-homosexual (and homosexuals themselves as well) labeled homosexuality (Norton, 2002). Therefore an etymological study on term of sexuality or gender in Thai language is important to understand how homosexuality has been understood in Thai society. This kind of study is detailed in Jackson (2000) who used the press, particularly newspaper, to investigate the transition of the naming of Thai gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. He also found the difficulty in applying the theory of Foucault (1980), a classic of queer studies, as sexuality is not the only sphere to explicate gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in Thai discourse but the Thai word *phet*, or what he translates as “eroticized gender”, is more pertinent.

Before the 1960s, all the forms of *phet* beyond normative male/female or masculinity/femininity, were called *kathoey*, including hermaphrodite, transgender, transsexual and both male and female homosexuals, but which term is generally only applicable to transgender in present usage. The term, however, has varied into different forms with the domains of sex, gender and sexuality since the 1960s.

Thai term *gay*, which represents male homoeroticism in contemporary Thai use, is not an old term, as the first exposure to masculine gay identity was in the 1960s with

the shocking news that an occasional male prostitute, a young leader of a gang, murdered an American English-newspaper editor in Bangkok. *Thai Rath* newspaper first used the term to explain male prostitutes, saying “men who sell themselves” and who call themselves “gay” (Jackson, 1999:234). The contemporary terms for female homoeroticism originate from English as well. The words describing lesbians such as *ael bii* (Thai acronym for L.B.) or *bian*, were once applied but used pejoratively (Taywaditeo Coleman Dumronggittigule, 2001), and finally *tom* from the English word “tomboy” for male role female homosexuals and *dee* derived from the last syllable of the English word “lady” for their feminine partner became common (Sinnott, 2004).

However, linguistically references to Thai transgender and transsexual people, for which *kathoey* is commonly used, has not been influenced by English words.

The use of the term *kathoey* to describe male homosexualities, however, has slowly given way to the more contemporary gay and its derivatives. Today, *kathoey* mostly refers to men who have feminine social behaviors, without much specific reference to their biological gender or sexual behavior. Being associated with feminine characters and other stereotypes, the term is considered derogatory by Thai gay men today, many of whom adamantly distinguish themselves from *kathoey*. ... As implied in the usage today, a *kathoey* is a man who sees himself more as a woman and often dresses, to varying degrees, as a woman, and likely to have sex with men. (Taywaditeo Coleman Dumronggittigule, 2001)

The applications of English terms for both male and female homoeroticism implies the concepts of male masculine-identified homosexuality and lesbianism are imported from, or at least influenced by, the West, contrary to the concepts of transgenderism that has been locally developed.

Historically, cross-dressing in Thailand existed before the modern era, as it is said that cross-dressing came from Northern Siam, and Chiang Mai appears to have the oldest reference of cross-dressing, according to Carl Bock (1986 cited in Jackson, 2003). William Alfred Rae Wood (1991) also mentions cross-dressing men in Chiang Mai, called *pu-mia* meaning “male-female” in the local language, in around the first couple decades of twentieth century.

In addition to that, female homosexual behavior, *len peuan* or “playing friends”, is represented in Siamese historical record of royal court documents (Sinnott, 2004). The documents show that female homosexual behavior was observable in the palace communities of concubines, and prohibited by King Rama IV. Another evidence of *len*

*pheuan* is recognizable in the epic poem by Thai poet Sunthorn Phu (1786- 1855), similarly in the epic poems written in the court of Rama III (1824-1851) as well. Visual images are also found in the nearly 200-year-old temple, Wat Khongkharam in Ratchaburi Province (Napat and Gordon, 1999 cited in Sinnott, 2004). However, the point is that it was not equivalent to present female-female lesbianism in terms of sexuality, but rather just sexual behavior (Sinnott, 2004). Consequently it is suspected the terms for gay and lesbianism in reference to sexuality (*gay, tom, dee*) were necessarily loaned from English. Rosalind Morris (1994 cited in Jackson, 2000) suggests that old *phet* category of man-*katoey*-woman is under the gender discourse while emerging *gay, tom, dee*, and bisexual has come out from sexuality domains.

## **6.2 Sanctions on Homosexuals in Thailand**

### **6.2.1 Buddhism and Homosexuality**

One of the reasons for the belief that Thailand is a gay paradise may be attributed to its religion. Buddhism, which is said that more than 90 percent of Thais believe in, is still thought of as a shelter for Western gays who are suffering from religious sanctions. Wendy Cadge (2005) introduces the idea that homosexual people in the United States are comfortable with Buddhist organizations such as the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, or San Francisco Zen Center because Buddhist texts are generally read as being neutral about homosexuality.

Homosexuality was recognized in ancient India. The *Vinaya*, Buddhist monastic discipline, mentions varieties of sexual behaviors including homosexual activities, and prohibited them for monks and nuns to keep their celibacy. In the rule, penetration of any orifices of the body, whether same or opposite sex, was prohibited strongly enough to be expelled from the monastery.

The people called *pandaka* are often observable in the rule. The translation of *pandaka* is vague, it is usually translated as eunuch (Harvey, 2000) but hermaphrodites (De Silva, n.d.) or just homosexuals (Zwilling cited in De Silva, n.d.) or/and male

transvestites (Jackson, 1995) is other interpretation<sup>1</sup>. *Pandaka* were not allowed to be ordained because of their character, explained as people that they are full of passion, unquenchable lust and dominated by sexual desire. Jackson (1995) says that Buddha's ban on the ordination of *pandaka* reflects his concern about the disruptive effect of transvestite homosexuals in an order of celibate, predominantly heterosexual monks.

There is an understanding of modern concept of homosexual, gay and lesbian in the *Vinaya*. According to Mettanando Bhikku (2005),

Of course, there was a case of a gay monk who was overcome by sexual desire and could no longer restrain himself. He was seducing his friends and novices to have sex with him. They rejected him so he left the monastery and had sex with men who were elephant keepers and horse keepers. When news spread around the entire Buddhist community that he was homosexual, the Buddha was alerted to the problem and he issued a rule for the community not to give any ordination to a homosexual, and those ordained gays are to be expelled. (Vinaya.I, 86).

Respectively,

Nuns who were caught in lesbian practices were not expelled from the order. They must confess to the fellows about their practice, and then the offence will be redeemed. (Vinaya. IV, 261)

In Buddhist discipline, there is no representation saying particularly male or female homosexual should be banned. They are probably interpreted as *pandaka*, with a focus on celibacy keeping rather than prohibition.

In the *Tipitaka*, Buddha's different recognition between hermaphrodites, eunuchs and homosexual novices was detectable. Although hermaphrodites and eunuchs are not to be ordained, there is no sanction against homosexuality (Mettanando, 2005). Jackson (1995) mentions that it is clear that hermaphrodites and *pandaka* are spiritually and ritually inferior to men, often compared with women and criminals in the *Vinaya* and the *Tipitaka*. Though hermaphrodites and *pandaka* were looked down, it seems that the Buddha's interest was directed toward monks' or nuns' celibacy for their salvation more than any homosexual activity itself. Homosexual behavior was banned as equally as heterosexual activity because it bothers their celibate life in monastery. Peter Harvey (2000:420) mentions "In all of this, rules relevant to homosexual activities or feelings are

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<sup>1</sup> A.L.De Silva is a pseudonym for a Buddhist monk who is responsible for the internet article at: <http://www.buddhanet.net/homosexu.htm>. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject, he prefers to remain anonymous.

simply part of those aimed at minimizing any expressions of sexuality by monks or nuns. ...It would be wrong, though, to regard the *Vinaya* as seeing homosexual relationships as more condonable for monks and nuns than heterosexual ones.”

With such understandings, it is reasonable to read that there is no religious sanction in Buddhism canon on homosexuality, differently from that of Christianity, which sees homosexuality as a sin. This is probably the reason why gay Buddhists do not need to feel guilty about their sexuality compared to gay Christians, and Buddhism attracts homosexuals in the United States. However, it does not necessarily mean that a Buddhist society is positive or even neutral toward homosexuality, rather these optimistic viewpoints are of the Western Christians'. Furthermore, certain Buddhism factors, in fact, work negatively on the acceptance of homosexuality especially when we look at it from social perspectives.

According to Taywaditeo Jod Kittiwut, Eli Coleman and Dumronggittigule Pacharin (2001), most Thais view homosexuality as resulting from one's bad karma or the lack of merit in past lives. This judgment may not be made from completely religious values but social aspects, reflecting people's view to homosexuality, at least people believe that bad karma caused it, which gay people can not influence it in this life. This attitude of Thais shows their feeling of pity toward homosexuals and it may be one of the reasons that Thai society is tolerant to homosexuals but not aggressive against them.

Regarding lay Buddhists and homosexuality, the third perception, a matter of sexual misconduct, becomes in dispute. Sexual misconduct is usually interpreted as causing harm to others through sexual activities, for example, adultery, child molestation, rape, incest, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and so on. In other words, if there is consent between two individuals, gay sex is not a sexual misconduct, the same as for straight sex. However, a matter is whether the sexual activity causes harm to anyone besides those two involving the sexual behavior. According to Chompooptawee and colleagues (1991 cited in Taywaditeo, Coleman, and Dumronggittigule, 2001), 75 percent of both male and female Thai adolescents have negative attitudes toward homosexuality, and consequently it would be difficult for homosexuals to expose their sexual preference because homosexuals become possibly offensive to others. Allyn (1991 cited in Taywaditeo, Coleman, and Dumronggittigule, 2001) says, “To reveal one's homosexual orientation to

one's parents would, in a sense, violate the Third Precept of Buddhism, and this has caused many Thai gays and lesbians to hide their homosexuality from their parents for fear of causing them sorrow.”

Additionally, there is another religious-social factor to the stigmatization of homosexuality in Thailand.

But the biggest problem is that homosexual acts harm (seriously harm) other people--this is directly in opposition to Buddhism. There is a huge list of health problems associated with homosexual acts, both physical and mental. Just a few are: Human Papillomavirus (HPV); Hepatitis; rectal and throat Gonorrhea; Gay Bowel Syndrome (GBS); HIV/AIDS; Anal Cancer; and more. (Evangelical.us, website of Mission to America)

Homosexuality as a source of disease, particularly AIDS, is what Jackson (1995) argues Thai Buddhists changed their attitude to homosexuals from toleration to condemnation in the 1980s when AIDS had a great impact on people's worry. For example, the monk Phra Phadet Thattajiwo (1987 cited in Jackson, 1995), a member of the influential conservative Wat Phra Dhammakaya movement, blamed gay people for the spread of AIDS, mentioning punishment to those who have engaged in unnatural sexual behavior including promiscuous sexual activity. Another critical statement was made by a clerical commentator on Buddhism and sex, Isaramuni states that sexual desire is natural phenomenon between men and women and when the desire is too excessive to control, sexual disorder, that is, homosexuality is a consequence of exorbitant sexual desire (Isaramuni, 1989 cited in Jackson, 1995). A similar comment by the philosopher monk Phra Ratchaworamuni (1984 cited in Jackson, 1995) was made explaining the male-male sex results from immoderate lust unsatisfied by heterosexual intercourse. Jackson (1995) describes,

The view that the origin of homosexuality lies in excessive lust appears to lend support to the popularly held view in Thailand that homosexual men and women cannot attain nibbana or high spiritual states, because in order to attain nibbana one must control and contain desire. Furthermore, if this ethical control were exercised, sexual desire would not flood outside the normal bounds of heterosexuality. Homosexuality is considered immoral because if homosexuals learned sexual self-restraint, like the heterosexual population, they would cease to be homosexual.

These censures that AIDS is a consequence of unnatural human being sexual behavior, particularly homosexuals, turned out to have relatively little impact on gay people

because the bigger problem of heterosexual transmission of HIV appeared.

Jackson (1995) analyzes these movements by the Buddhists saying that AIDS alone is not the reason of Buddhists' passionate attack on homosexuality, but it is also attributed to reformist formulations of Buddhism associated with a de-emphasis on karma as an explanation of society or people. At present, the idea of interventionists focusing on individuals' responsibility for the future, rather than karma is probably as big a challenge for homosexual people. The excuse that homosexuality is a consequence of bad karma is not available, but behaviors of homosexuals might reflect society's eyes.

As seen above, the religious impact on homosexuality in contemporary Thailand is more related to social factors, and exists deep in the people's judgmental mechanism for both heterosexuals and homosexuals. Allyn (1991 cited in Taywaditeo, Coleman, and Dumronggittigule, 2001) says that Thai people's value is harmony and family, and even Buddhism teaching is neutral to homosexuality itself, but the idea that engaging in homosexual activity or confessing homosexuality has the possibility to bring anti-social expectation, here disharmony in society or disappointment of family, and it means that exposing homosexuality in public causes harm. Here the society determines the religious judgment. Unlike Christian understanding of homosexuality as a sin, Thai homosexuals' hardship is friction and not to meet the expectation of society.

### **6.2.2 Legal Sanctions on Homosexuality**

One of the differences between the West and Thailand is legality on homosexuality. In many western countries, historically people have suffered under anti-homosexual laws, but in Thailand there has not experienced any significant legal sanction on same-sex activity. Even though Thailand briefly had a law against homosexuality in the early twentieth century, homosexuality has never been subject to the legal repression that it has had in the West. The law that was enacted was little known, never enforced and attempted to demonstrate modernity in legal forms in the late nineteenth century (Loos, 1999 cited in Sinnott, 2004)



### 6.2.3 Media and Homosexuality

According to Megan Sinnott (2004), the majority of Thai media tends to regard homosexuality as abnormal, a non-Thai concept brought in by Western influence. Visibility of homosexuals in Thai society has risen in recent years and some believe Thai society now accepts homosexuality more than before. Acceptance of homosexuality has been positioned as both a negative sign of Westernization and a positive sign of modernization (Sinnott, 2004).

Jackson's study on the term 'gay' in Thai newspapers shows that a series of editorial in Thai Rath newspaper since 1965 presents "some of the most vituperative anti-homosexual polemics" (1999:235) and a similar response was seen in the mid-1980s when AIDS firstly became an issue in Thailand. In his study of Thai media and sexual minority, Jackson (2002) points out that the media has expressed homosexuality as an object of blaming and the Thai state has suppressed the imaging of gender and sexual minorities, such as bans of Miss Siam *Kathoey* Beauty Contest in 1972 and a film on male prostitutes in 1974, and the Prime Minister's attempt to ban *kathoey* on television in 1999.

Historically, homosexuality, as well as other sexual or gender minorities, has been portrayed negatively in Thai media. Yet recent media's attitudes toward homosexuality has been changing, as Jackson says, "transition in state media relations demonstrates the declining real power of the Thai bureaucracy in the face of emerging groups such as media entrepreneurs, activist-journalists and public intellectuals"(2002:227). However, as will be addressed in later sections, the image of homosexuality in commercial films seems more to be an object for comic relief or melodramatic sentiment.

### 6.2.4 Politics and Homosexuality

The gay rights movement, in a Western point of view, is almost invisible in Thailand, although the country had experienced incidents which held the possibility to raise gay rights activity as in Western countries. The movement came to fore in

December 1996 when the Rajabhat Institutes Council, governing all Thai teacher training colleges, issued a prohibition on gay students from enrolling in the teacher training course as they were deemed inappropriate role models for the youth. The case ended when the institute lifted the ban, evidently due to international and domestic pressure (Sinnott, 2004). This indicates that the nation has a possible gay rights movement when threatened with discrimination. However, in terms of gay civil rights, such as same sex marriage, the politics is not very active. Before the Rajabhat case, the gay rights organization *Chaai Chaawb Chaai*, men liking men, was established in 1981 but it was closed shortly afterwards because there was no overt evidence of discrimination. In addition to the Rajabhat case, the homophobic attitude of authoritarian academics can be seen the raided alternative love film festival at Chulalongkorn University in 1998, which will be discussed later section in this chapter.

### **6.2.5 Economy and Homosexuality**

One of the reasons that makes Thailand appear as a gay paradise may be the visibility of male sex workers in gay bars. However, De Lind Van's fieldwork in Chiang Mai (2001) shows that more than half of workers identify themselves as non-homosexual and the motives for working in gay bar are good pay and easiness of the job. Certainly these bars are commercialized and part of sex tourism targeting gay tourists. But De Lind Van Wijngaarden's analysis of the rationalizing mechanism in that non-homosexual men have sex with men, which is usually a direct threat to the masculine status in Western discourse, is interesting in finding regarding Thai non-homosexual men's viewpoints of sexuality including homosexuality. Thai culture dealing with masculinity or "masculine honor" is one factor according to De Lind Van (2001). The sex worker does not necessarily recognize his male client as real men. This understanding then keeps him in a dominant role in sexual intercourse with the client and still the worker can have active sexual life with women. Consequently, the sex worker does not perceive having sex with male client as un-masculine. Another factor is the Thai social hierarchy factor, in which less powerful persons should satisfy more a powerful person's wishes, such that they do not perceive any female gender identity, even though they have to be penetrated.

De Lind Van (2001) explains that gay nightlife in some places in Thailand is focused around male prostitution, with only a few non-prostitution gay places in the Chiang Mai, where his field works was done. Jackson (1989:262) mentioned, “Homosexual lifestyle in Thailand are even more controlled and determined by business interests than in Western countries”. Allyns (1991 cited in Taywaditeo, Coleman, and Dumronggittigule, 2001) also says that entertainment businesses for gay men have been nourished in big cities such as gay restaurants, pubs both with and without male sex workers, and this is true in case of Bangkok. These new developments provide homosexual men and women with the chance to meet and have both sexual and non-sexual relationship with non-prostitutes. The combination of tourism and the sex industry is one thing that makes Thailand unique and highly visible as a homosexual-friendly country, but at the same time, in the era of globalization, an appreciation of a new gay scene like Westerners has developed as well.

#### **6.2.6 Myth of Thailand as a Gay Paradise**

The situation regarding homosexuality in Thailand has been reviewed above from various aspects. The investigation shows that the Western image of Thailand as a gay paradise based on a lack of religious and legal sanction against homosexuality and visibility of transgender and male sex industry, is not appropriate considering different aspects, such as Thai social attitude. What Thai homosexuals are struggling against is not similar to what Western homosexuals have fought for, and won or lost. Jackson’s (1989) interpretation of Uncle Go gay column, a magazine column people can consult with about homosexual issues, describes the un-acceptance of homosexuals in Thai society. The lack of legal and religious sanctions makes homosexuals lazy gay political activists. However, no one knows if liberation is the best answer for Thai gays who live in Thai society.

In the pre-modern period, the nation enjoyed certain sexual values, for example polygamy, however with the state’s quest for being civilized, the custom was abolished and new sexual values became the nation’s normality. When people say that homosexuality is not within the nation’s value but it is from the West or is abnormal, then what is the nation’s value on gender or sexuality and normal gender or sexuality? The

impact of Siamese modernization or Westernization was too strong to be moral codes of the country, which Jackson calls “Thai regime of images”(2004) to explain the power controlling the actions in public and private spheres. Jackson points out “the Thai regime emerged as a part of Siam’s response to the challenges presented by Western imperial power”(2004:187). Sopawan (2006) said that the body of *kathoey*, transgender, was regarded as uncivilized while Jackson (2003) states that the Siamese state exerted themselves to represent heterosexual relations as civilized. Furthermore, the Western manners, including dressing manner, were promoted by the leaders such as King Vajiravudh and Phibun as Thai national policies while traditional and Chinese clothing was rejected as uncivilized and un-Thai (Sopawan, 2006).

Presently Thailand faces a new notion of sexuality, homosexuality, from the West, which people believe to be one aspect of globalization. It may threaten Thai sexual norms, which is civilized and Thai in the official understanding, and built in the era of modernization.

### **6.3 Emergence of Thai Queer Films in the Era of Globalization.**

#### **6.3.1 Contemporary Thai *Kathoey* Cinema: Distinction from *Gay***

In the study of male transgender and gay, Jackson (2000) proposed the necessity to distinguish *kathoey*, male transgender or transsexuals, and *gay*. As seen in the etymological development of the homosexual terms in Thai, *kathoey* has been used before for both male homosexuality and transgender, and the term *gay* was born in the complex relationship with both *kathoey* and man in the 1960s while Western concept of gay is an oppositional notion against straight (Jackson, 2000). Especially, when thinking of the social tolerance of homosexuality in Thailand, this distinction between *gay* and *kathoey* becomes significant, as Jackson (2000:238) explains.

The *kathoey* in Thai, safe, familiar, and is generally regarded (both by *kathoey* and the wider community) to be a psychological woman born inside a man’s body. The gay man, on the other hand, is more likely to be considered foreign, strange, potentially dangerous, or even criminal, and perverted form of manhood... *kathoey* do not really exist in the domain of homoeroticism and their desire is appropriated within a heterosexual framework. The *kathoey* has “normal”, heterosexual female desire.

Even though both *gay* and *kathoey* has been thought of as an abnormal form of sexual identity and stigmatized, the view of *gay* and *kathoey* is not identical. Although it does not necessarily mean that *kathoey* enjoy easier life in Thailand, Thai society is probably more tolerant of *kathoey* than *gay*. *Kathoey* is physically visible in public but *gay* is invisible until made visible. Jackson (2000:238) adds

A gay man's sexuality is commonly tolerated as an open secret amongst family, work colleagues, and heterosexual friends. ... However, if a gay man's sexuality is exposed and let loose within the expanding circuits of open conversation, rather than contained within the safe bounds of semi-hidden gossip, then anxiety, confusion, and shame are often generated both for the man who is revealed and for the observers who are confronted with the undeniable immediacy of his sexuality. It is only when gay men are as open about their sexual difference as *kathoey* are about their feminine gender status that they are criticized, and when gay men are as "visible" as *kathoey* they are often much more vehemently criticized than the latter.

A gay man is regarded as more problematic in Thai society especially when he makes his sexuality visible.

From the 1980s to 1990s, high visibility of transgenders in Thai television, especially in soap operas, made the Thai government concerned about the influence toward children, and the state once tried to control it. However, Thai *kathoey* cinema has not been a target of state-censorship. Heart-warming *kathoey* movies such as *Satri Lek*, about a volleyball team of mixed transgender, transsexual, gay and straight, or *Beautiful Boxer*, on a transgender *muaythai* boxing fighter, both films based on fact, were well received by domestic moviegoers. This may probably be attributed to the historical background of *kathoey* in Thailand, as audience were already used to *kathoey* characters in television and found it much easier to accept. These two films also achieved international success and *kathoey* has now become a symbol of Thailand, with high visibility of transgender in any cities or cabaret show of transgender and transsexual as tourist spots. Both the domestic and international success of *Satri Lek* lead the director to release a sequel using the same characters before they became a volleyball team as *Satri Lek 2 (Iron ladies 2, 2003)*. A similar sport-featured transgender story, *Wai Buem...Chia Krahuem Lok (I'm Lady, Poj Arnon, 2003)* came into the cinema as well as *Phleng Sutthai (The Last Song, Pisal Akraseranee, 2006)*, a remake of the 1985 film of the same title, drawing the tragic love of a beautiful transsexual, shows the possibility of serious

love between a transsexual and a straight man. The film was widely screened in the cinema complexes in Bangkok. The same director of *Wai Buem...Chia Krahuem Lok*, Paj Arnon made *Plon Na Ya* (Spicy Beauty Queen of Bangkok, 2004), a comedy about four transgenders who try to rob a bank. Even though *kathoey* is often easily portrayed as noisy comical sub characters in TV programs or movies, the new understanding of *kathoey* seems to have been developed and portrayed into a main subject, even though most of them are to generate laughter, especially compared to gay males or lesbians.

In a study of Asian homosexual films, Andrew Grossman (2000 cited in Kaewprasert, 2005) categorized queer cinema into two categories, the first "a propagandistic search for bourgeois acceptance", and the other "a radical challenge to sexual hegemony". In this sense, all the mainstream *kathoey* films above are the former, without any strong political message of being *kathoey*, and even though some parts of the films represent the difficulty of being a *kathoey*, the theme of film is not really on their identity. Kawprasert (2005:3) evaluates *Phleng Sutthai* (The Last Song, Pisal Akkraseranee) of the 1985 version, commenting "it was made for commercial purposes by a heterosexual director-producer Pisal Akkraseranee. The film targeted general audience rather than any specific group, and it was intended to be popular for capitalistic purpose". In a capitalist country, it is natural that filmmaking has to face the capitalistic motivation as well, but still the distinction that Grossman made is important to notice. The series of mainstream queer cinema was what Grossman calls "a propagandistic search for bourgeois acceptance", which tries to cater to middle class popularity. However, this chapter focused on independent queer films shows that they are challengers against both mainstream portrayal of queer subjectivities and Thai regime of image.

### **6.3.2 Complexity of Sexuality and Gender in Thai Discourse**

Even though the distinction between *kathoey* and *gay* is necessary for this study, they are not completely differentiated because the Thai concept of homosexuality is not completely homosexual as sexuality. This analysis looks at the emergence of gay movies as one aspect of internationalization of queer identity, and the challenge against sexual hegemony of the state. However, at the same time, the position of homosexuals in

contemporary Thailand is not equivalent to the Western concept of homosexuality, which “privileges sexuality over gender” (Jackson 2000:415), but it is a complex combination of sexual identity, eroticism for male or female body, and gender, preference of masculine or feminine performance. Jackson (2000:416) explained the difficulty in the distinction between sexuality and gender in Thai discourse, exemplified in the term *phet*, on Thai categorization of sex,

...this distinction is extremely difficult to sustain because *phet* is the only term available to describe notion of erotic desire (*khwaam-tong-kan thong-phet*, ‘sexual wants’), erotic acts (*ruam phet*, ‘to have sex’, *phet samphan*, ‘sexual relations’), masculinity/maleness(*phet-chai*), or femininity/femaleness (*phet-ying*).

Although attention will be focused on contemporary Thai gay/lesbian films, with more concentration on sexuality, this complexity of *phet*, or the ambiguity between sexual identity and gender preference, can be seen in those movies as well. This reflects the consequence of both globalization and localization of homosexuality in Thailand (Jackson, 2000).

### 6.3.3 Thai Queer Cinema in the 1980s

In spite of the image of a homosexual heaven, Thai gays, in fact, suffer from difficulties in terms of religious, social, or even economic factors. The lack of direct mention in legal codes and Buddhist doctrines does not mean that Thai homosexuals are free from obstacles, but rather that society has taken into account saving face and good image, which has caused distress to them as a sexual minority. This implies that the existence of queer films that show them in a serious manner, and which makes homosexuality open and public, is a challenge to the hegemonic sexual notion or the Thai regime of image. As Kawprasert (2005) says, the first series of Thai queer films appeared in the 1980s with *Phleng Sutthai* (1985), *Rak Thoraman* (Tortured Love, Pisal Akraseranee, 1987), and *Chan Phuchai Na Cha* (I Am a Man, Ml. Bandevanop Devakul, 1987). Concerning the first male gay film, *Chan Phuchai Na Cha*, produced, written and starring Dr. Seri Wongmonta, it is noteworthy to understand Thai hegemony on male homosexuality. Dr. Seri is probably the most famous openly gay man in Thailand, who was expelled from his position at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication,

Thammasat University due to the pressure by conservative academics on his open gayness. However, since then, gay or lesbian themes have not become a subject of a mainstream Thai film until recently, while *kathoey* has gained popularity in television and cinema.

### 6.3.4 Contemporary Thai Queer Cinema

Since Dr. Seri's film, Thailand has not made homosexuality-themed films until recently. It does not mean that homosexuals have been absent in Thai mass media or films but have been shown from a non-homosexual point of view. Vitaya Saeng-Aroon, a director of Cyberfish Media and also a well-known openly gay columnist in local newspapers says,

Nearly all Thai movies to date have portrayed gay men as stereotypical caricatures: stupid, clownish men who wear dresses. Very little Asian media is relevant to or represents gay people...Media images are a powerful force in shaping societal attitudes toward groups of people. Thai media has encouraged homophobia with their consistently negative, sneering portrayal of gays as men as effeminate idiots. To Thai movie and TV companies, making fun of gay people provides cheap, free laughs with no consequences to the people they target (Vitaya in *Fridae*, 2007)

However, recent newly rising Thai cinema, mostly in independent films, witnesses the emergence of gay themed movies especially concentrating on sexual identity.

#### 6.3.4.1 Alternative Love Film Festival

Confrontations over homosexuality are observable in the world of Thai cinema. Thai academics, Salathaip Jarupoom and Sopawan Boonnimitra of the Department of Motion Pictures and Still Photography at Chulalongkorn University, felt the necessity of gay and lesbian theme films to be shown for educational purpose, and organized the Alternative Love Film Festival at the Saeng Arun Arts Complex in October 1998 (Berry, 1998). However, the festival was raided after ten minutes of the opening by a policeman claiming immoral films were to be shown. Nothing immoral and illegal was found there and the festival continued without any trouble. In fact, the interruption was rooted in the film censorship board as one of the police officers there was from the Film Censorship



Office with an official complaint memo from Patamavadee Jaruwon, the Head of the Film Department of the university and also a member of the Censorship Board, saying the subject of the festival could ruin the reputation of the university. In an interview, Berry (1998) asked Sopawan Boonnimitra, one of the organizers, why film-screenings of sexually explicit scenes are illegal while the highly visible sex industry and prostitution is allowed to exist. Sopawan answered,

This is a very difficult question. If this festival had been organized by the gay and lesbian community as private screenings, there would have been no problem. But this festival just threw everything in the face of society, and so some people could not handle that. The law is still in the age of the dinosaurs. This is a Buddhist country where we allow people to lead their own lives, and so long as it's not in everyone's faces they can pretend that they don't know. (Sopawan in Berry, 1998)

The answer seems to indicate that Thai Buddhist society cannot accept the existence of open homosexuality and they would rather try to ignore or think it as nothing to do with their own life. Jackson's understanding of Thai society's attitude toward homosexuality is "tolerant but un-accepting" (1999), and in the case of interruption of the film festival, the Censorship Board had to do it once the screening became public and un-ignorable. Sopawan (2006) explains the screening event was eventually held after turning it into private event with the sign saying "Membership only". This sharply demonstrates the Thai regime of image, which tries to control actions in public and private spheres. Moreover the incident evidently shows the authoritarian attitude toward homosexuality, which condemns it as immoral.

**6.3.4.2 Gay and Lesbian as Sexual Identity: *Thang Rak Si Rung* (Rainbow, Yukthna Khunkhongstiaiw, 2003), *Rainbow Boy Rung Tua Thi Paet Khong Khwam Rak* (Rainbow Boy, Thunyathorn Sivanukroa, 2005) and *Kaeng Chani Kap I Aep* (Metrosexual, Yongyooth Thongkonthun, 2006)**

*Thang Rak Si Rung* is a textbook gay and lesbian film whose message is "Be Yourself No Matter What You Are". The movie mainly presents the story of two couples, one gay and another lesbian. One day a young middleclass boy, Man, working as a fashion model, was introduced to a middle-aged male charismatic fashion columnist, Bee.

Bee is openly gay and recently heartbroken from breaking-up with his ex-boyfriend, another young fashion model. On the other hand, a young female journalist, Oui, a friend of Man's sister, has a problem with her boyfriend and telephoned to the famous DJ, Vivien, whose real name is Waan, on a love consulting radio program. Waan is actually Oui's old friend from her high school days when they had a lesbian-like relationship. While Bee and Waan are openly homosexual in the film, both Man and Oui are conflicted over their sexuality. Man is attracted to Bee but being raised in strict conventional family, Man is confused and conflicted about his emotion to the fashion columnist and his sexuality. Oui's problem is not her sexuality at first, but her boyfriend who is careless with her. However, her reunion with the old intimate friend, Waan, who still keeps emotional feelings to Oui, modifies her understanding on homosexuality. Although the characters in the film look naive, as Man and Oui are not confident in their sexuality, the film examines the emergence of gay/lesbian as a sexual identity, especially, in the youthful Man, who finds difficulty in coming out to his conventional family since his father is a strict soldier who wishes his only son to be a soldier like himself. At the end of the story, Man confesses his homosexuality to his family members and runs out from his family, while Oui breaks up with her boyfriend and becomes a happy couple with Waan. The film messages obviously are the importance of being oneself no matter one's sexuality.

*Rainbow Boy Rung Tua Thi Paet Khong Khwam Rak*, promoted as "Thailand's first gay coming-of-age film", is based on the American first youth gay novel *Rainbow Boy* series. This is a story of three male university students. Closet-gay Tud and open gay Nut are good friends who can talk about anything, but Nut actually has a special secret feeling for Tud. Ake, a school basketball player, is a classmate of Tud and Nut, and has a girlfriend in the same school. One day, Ake appears at a discussion meeting on gay and lesbian issues in a coffee shop and starts to feel that he could be gay after listening to comments by people there. Tud's mother accidentally finds out the sexuality of her son and Tud has to face the reality with his strict father while Ake is wondering about his sexuality after the meeting. Tud and Ake become close when the smart Tud helps Ake study. Ake finally tells his girlfriend of his sexual orientation and breaks up with her. After break-up and some episodes to build closer friendship between Ake and Tud, they

eventually become a gay couple. Similar to the previous *Thang Rak Si Rung*, the film shows the confusing sexual identity of youth as well as confrontation with conservative parents, especially a father. Both *Thang Rak Si Rung* and *Rainbow Boy Rung Tua Thi Paet Khong Khwam Rak* depict the importance of confidence in homosexual identity even though the process requires sacrifices such as insults from a father or girlfriend, who represents the conventional society of Thailand.

Even though the filmmaker Yongyuth Tongkonthun, the director of *kathoey* featured successful *Satri Lek* and *Satri Lek 2*, categorized this film non-gay, *Kaeng Chani Kap I Aep* is another film exposing the ambiguity and naive-ness of homosexuality in Thailand. Kong, a young handsome man, is just engaged to his girlfriend Pang, but female friends of Pang are doubtful on Kong's sexuality because of his excessively fashionable and delicate manners and good understanding of women matters. As a comedy movie, the film shows the lady friends' secret manhunt for Kong's real sexuality with comical taste, and he eventually divulges un-confidence on his sexuality at the end of film. Then finally their wedding is cancelled. The film shows the ambiguity of homosexuality in Thailand. Because his manner is too delicate and probably more feminine than ideal Thai male image, his sexual orientation can be questioned as being homosexual. Although not focusing on his sexuality as identity in the film, which is probably the reason why the director called it a non-gay film, the complex combination of sexual identity and gender is still noticeable in the film.

The films like *Thang Rak Si Rung*, *Rainbow Boy Rung Tua Thi Paet Khong Khwam Rak* or *Kaeng Chani Kap I Aep* featuring sexuality of gay and lesbians are new in Thailand. The strong attention to sexual identity in the films is probably ascribed to the global queering or influence of western gay and lesbian life style from globalization. However, at the same time the examples also show the complexity of sexual identity in Thailand, which is a mixture of eroticism for male or female body (sexuality), and preference of masculine or feminine performance (gender) (Jackson, 2000). *Thang Rak Si Rung* focus on the identity of homosexuals, which is a central issue for queer discussion in Western countries, but the scenes of Man's curiosity in lipstick when he is alone, or Man's preference to dressing like girl when he was a little kid, represent the combination of sexuality and gender matters. At the last part of the story, Man puts on slim clothes like

a lady to express his sexuality in front of his parents even though he never talk or behave like a *kathoey*. The doubt of Kong's sexuality in *Kaeng Chani Kap I Aep* has roots in his delicate cares on fashion or cosmetics, which is generally regarded as very feminine. These are interesting portrayals that sexual identity as a homosexual and gender identity as feminine comes together. It is probably because male homosexual has been understood as a gender, which is often called the third gender, with feminine behavior. In other words, Thai homosexual as a gender may have been created by its performativity. However, Man in *Thang Rak Si Rung* is portrayed as a *gay* but not a *kathoey*. Likewise, Kong in *Kaeng Chani Kap I Aep* does not show any homoerotic desire but his performance makes people think he is a homosexual. The films represent the complex combinations on sexuality and gender in Thai homosexual discourse, and become an example of Thai queer performativity as well as localized globalization or hybridization.

#### **6.3.4.3 Representing Gay Life: *Silom Soi2* (Silom Soi2, Piya Rangsitienchai, 2005), *Sat Pralat* (Tropical Malady, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004)**

While the portrayal of homosexuality as sexual identity started to be recognizable in Thai cinema, the life of gay and lesbians, whose story is from a viewpoint of homosexuals, has emerged as well.

*Silom Soi 2*, named after Bangkok's famous street for gay bars and gay clubs, is the representation of Thai gay life, and based on a real story. Tum, a young gay man, drinks with his friends at a bar in Silom Soi 2 and accidentally meets handsome Keng. Drunk, those two men get together and spend one night, which makes Tum fall in love with Keng. However, the next time Tum sees him in the same bar, he is kissing another guy. The scene makes Tum mad but he finally reveals his emotion to Keng and they officially become a couple. While enjoying their couplehood, Keng feels a pain in his neck and goes for a medical check, which determines that Keng is HIV-positive. Tum has some doubts since there is a lack of sexual intimacy, but Keng disguises the disease until hospitalized and even tells a lie to his boyfriend that he suffers from cancer, not AIDS. Keng passes away soon after his confession of the real disease and the story ends with

tragic sentiment. While the film is quiet in its portrayal of the threat of the syndrome, but it is not as aggressively as some Buddhists attacked homosexuals in real life. Rather, the story seems a lesson to the gay audience with a message about safe sex and the avoidance of wild sexual relationships.

*Sat Pralat* is an international award-winning film by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. The movie describes the life of a male gay couple in the rural area. The visibility of homosexual men in the rural area is not unusual although Bangkok's liberal environment is preferred (Jackson, 2000:414). The cinema depicts the peaceful daily life of a gay couple, unemployed Tong and his passionate boyfriend Keng, a low-ranked soldier. The cinema never insists on the issue of homosexuals but the restful picture of their life says homosexuals are nothing special but a part of daily life in Thai society. The website of "kick the machine", a production company of the director, comments on the film as "In Tropical Malady, the horror story disguises a disturbing sexual political agenda." The film seems to contain a more political sense regarding sexuality than its look.

#### **6.3.4.4 Buddhism and Homosexuality: *Tam Sainam* (Down the River, Anucha Boonyawatana, 2004) and *Portrait of a Man in Habits* (Michael Shaowanasai, 2000)**

Anucha Boonyawatana is another independent movie director who continues to shoot gay-theme works. As a member of the group for independent filmmakers, the thaiindie, his four short films, *The Sun Lover* (The Sun Lover, 2006), *Boy's Love* (Boy's Love, 2006), *Tam Sainam* (Down the River, 2004) and *Scarlet Desire* (Scarlet Desire, 2001) have been screened in several film festivals at both the domestic and international level, and his work was released as "Male Seduction" in DVD format from the thaiindie group as one of their first DVD release projects. His academic final year project at Chulalongkorn University, *Tam Sainam* was welcomed both at domestic and international screenings. The film represents a love story between two men concerning Buddhist philosophy. Anucha (2006) says,

Although "Down the River" is not a political film, as it focus on relationships of a gay couple, but I want to present an idea about "the old Thai way of life" that very concern

Buddhist teaching of “Let It Go”. As in this time the old value like this is not make sense for most of the Thai people anymore. I make this film to respect the Buddhist religion for it is the one that never say “to be gay is sin.

His comment reflects the intricate relationship between Buddhism and homosexuality in Thailand.

Besides the form of motion picture, the issue of Buddhism and homosexuality is seen in a contemporary art form of Michael Shaowanasai. Shaowanasai is a Thai conceptual artist, who claims to be the only openly gay artist in Thailand. His work, “Portrait of a Man in Habits” (2000) becomes an obvious challenge to Thai Buddhism. The work represents Shaowanasai’s portrait in saffron monk’s robe with feminine make-up and a handkerchief of kiddy character of Pokemon. Pandit (2006) analyzes the work as an interrogation against one of the mainstays of the Thai national imaginary, Thai Buddhism, whose law prohibits homosexuals to be ordained as a monk. Mentioning the “nation-religion-monarchy” ideology, Pandit concludes, “Shaowanasai not only raises questions about sexual-religious practices and identities but also questions how national imaginaries are produced and reproduced in the realm of contemporary Thai art.”(2006:133) Shaowanasai’s work became a talk of town with a Thai newspaper, *the Daily News*, comments on his exhibition, and eventually it was banned after severe reactions arose (Pandit, 2006). Shaowanasai is also active as a movie actor playing a role of a transgender in Apichatpong’s *Huachai Thon Nong (The Adventure of Iron Pussy*, 2003) and a gay man in Yongyooth’s *Kaeng Chani Kap I Aep*.

#### 6.3.4.5 Independent Queer Cinema

As seen in the indie movement as an anti-conformity position, some of the indie films challenged the attitude of Thai society and eagerly express their queerness. In fact, the movies above such as *Silom Soi 2*, *Rainbow Boy Rung Tua Thi Paet Khong Khwam Rak Tam Sainam* and *Sat Pralat* are all from non-mainstream productions.

In addition to outstanding independent filmmaker Apichatpong, the works of another internationally recognized Thai indie filmmaker, Thunskā Pansittivorakul, are strongly titillating in filmmaking, as most of his films are hardly available in Thailand because of censorship. Many of his short films are expressing sexual curiosity to the male

body from the view of homoeroticism, which includes visual images of male genitals. Not only homosexual themes, his feature length documentary films challenge Thai notion of gender, as *Voodoo Girls* (Voodoo Girls, 2002) shows the sexual openness of his real girl friends, as well as *Happy Berry* (Happy Berry, 2004) exposes the private life of Thai youth and goes beyond the Thai conventional moral level. *Voodoo Girls* was banned from being screened at the 2005's Bangkok International Festival supported by the national institution Tourist Authority of Thailand, saying that it shows a bad image of Thai women (Sudarat, 2007). In an interview, Thunskaa answers a film critic,

Censorship is the order of the day in this society. Everything is seen as morally sensitive, and they prefer to ban, prohibit, cancel, rather than to try to understand the things that are going on. ... I'm not provoking, I'm not inciting any changes or preaching anything. I simply want to show the other side, to let the people know that it exists. In all the documentaries I've done, my idea is to sketch an honest picture of young people in Bangkok, to show that this is their lives, and that lives can be imperfect, strange, difficult, fun and diverse. There's no lesson to learn; I just show it as it is, (Thunskaa in Kong, 2006a)

As a founder of the thaiindie group, he has promoted independent films. From a non-mainstream position, his desire to let the people know the other side is natural, but at the same time, it is very brave in the Thai society, where saving image is important. His challenge against the Thai regime of image seems intentional, as he said in the website of thaiindie.

Most of my works are about sex. Between Art and obscenity, lies a very thin line. Some might think that my films are porn, but if you bring them close together for comparison, you will definitely see the difference. I talk about sex because I strongly feel the hypocrisy around here. We say that we need to maintain our virtuous culture, that nudity is Western thing. That's so untrue. We had nudity on wall paintings in temples. Thai girls used to walk around topless. We started wearing clothes because of the Western! Because we didn't want them to think that we were so barbarian, right? Sombat, Nathaya, Sorapong used to be naked in films, but now it's forbidden. Sex is seen as something disgusting and shouldn't be mentioned. For me, the more you try to hide, the more interesting it becomes. (Thunskaa in thaiindie English weblog)

With Thunskaa in a leading and pioneering position, non-comical sexually-themed film is now becoming a subject of independent film. *My First Boyfriend* (My First Boyfriend, 2004) of Issara Maneewat became an official selection of 2005 Bangkok International Film Festival, the biggest film festival in the country. Self-categorizing as a romantic-documentary, the film experimentally looks at the

homosexuality of the director himself through pursuing his unrequited love and quest for a date with him. Issara used the opportunity of film shooting as an excuse to have a first date with the actor, his straight crush, and questions him about homosexuality. The process of filmmaking unintentionally, or intentionally, reveals the filmmaker's sexuality and serious perturbation to it, shown in recitation of a continuous monologue addressed in the last part of the film. As a documentary film, he risked his social position, but at the same time the film gives watchers strong impact.

2007's annual 11<sup>th</sup> short film festival, organized by the Thai film foundation witnesses this trend as well. *Hi! (Hi!, Bundit Thianrat, 2006)* and *Nao Nuea (North Cold, Veramon Liptawat, 2006)* express subtle relationships of homosexual desire to heterosexuals. On the other hand, *Dek Bap (Child of Sin, Seri Lachonnabot, 2007)* presents a complex relation between a father, having lost his wife, and a boy having found himself to be transgender. A documentary *Rueang Ching (One True Thing, Vichart Somkaew, 2006-2007)* is a courageous work as the director uses the filmmaking opportunity as his confession of homosexuality. Through the documentary film, his close friends and his mother, as well as the audience, would know the secret he has been keeping and his serious anxiety and trepidation over his tears after his disclosure. *Moken, pa? (Moken, right?, Phisan Sangjan, Taryart Datsathean and Nattawit Kaosri, 2007)* is an intelligent comical documentary looking at the Moken people, a minority living in the islands of the Andaman Sea, through the eyes of a gay boy. At first it looks at the gay boy as a hilarious figure and of the Moken as a not-yet-globalized fantasy, making us think of the documentary with a typical commercialized style. However the final comment of the gay boy on social discrimination against both homosexuality and the Moken clarifies the message of the filmmakers. The documentary criticizes the notion of image by using both ethnic and sexual minorities.

The prosperity of queer films in the indie scene implies that serious gay-themed movies are still in the peripheral in the film industry and out of market. The lack of homophobic violence and the fact there are no legal and religious sanctions on homosexuality makes political gay movements inactive, and consequently Thai queer movies do not include intense political messages in them. Yet, in the society which disregards or tolerates homosexuality or expects homosexuality to be invisible, the



production of gay films especially from their point of view is brave.

In other words, the indie film scene creates the queer space for people who cannot express their sexual identity in the mainstream industry. As Nina Wakeford's study on new technology and cyber-queer (2002) shows that technology of internet provide the queer space and virtual communities, the new technology of digital filmmaking, and independent film scene in Thailand, create a space for the artists to express their sexual identity, which has been stigmatized in the country. The difference of this queer space between website, where people can be anonymous, and film, is that the latter brings a filmmaker into more public sphere. Therefore, this chapter analyzes that a trend of homosexuality-theme in independent film is a challenge against a Thai regime of image, at the same time, it is creating a queer space for self-expression.

#### 6.3.4.6 Trend of Queer Cinema and Commercialism

The year 2007, when this thesis is being written, has witnessed a trend of gay movies. At a seminar of co-production at the Bangkok International Festival 2007, one Thai producer generalized the present situation of Thai film productions as either horror, action, or gay-comedy. Big budget gay films such as *Tat Su Fut* (Kungfu Tootsie, Jaturong Mokjok, 2007), *Khu Raet* (The Odd Couple, Noparat Phutha-rattanamanee, 2007), *Ho Taeo Taek* (Haunting Me, Poj Arnon, 2007), *Koi Thoe Ke* (Ghost Station, Yuthlert Sippapal, 2007) have been released, as well as *Club M2* (Club M2, Thunyathorn Sivanukroa, 2007) produced by the same members of *Rainbow Boy Rung Tua Thi Paet Khong Khwam Rak*. Since the 2005's academy award nomination of *Hupkhao Ren Rak* (Brokeback Mountain, 2005) by Taiwanese filmmaker Ang Lee, in spite of missing the Oscar for Best Picture, the film became a world wide notable gay film, praised by both art cinema fans and cinema complex goers. The position of gay films in Thailand also seems to have changed since that time. The influence, for example, has strongly seen in two gay cowboys in *Koi Thoe Ke*.

Yet these big budgeted films are not comparable to the independent films examined in the previous sections. The gay films such as *Rainbow Boy Rung Tua Thi Paet Khong Khwam Rak*, *Club M2* or other independent films mostly made by gay

directors or producers have been attracting mainly a gay audience, while new gay trend films are aiming at a good laugh for non-gay spectatorship. This new trend in mainstream film industry is what Grossman (2000) categorized "a propagandistic search for bourgeois acceptance", and not only *kathoey* but also *gay* men finally stand on a stage. A Bangkok-based film critic Kong (2007b) says

Whereas big-budget flicks with gay protagonists are made as entertainment for the masses, gay filmmakers seem to swing decisively in the other direction. More sympathetic to homosexual characters, a number of gay movies by gay filmmakers seem to be made specifically to attract a gay audience - even if that means alienating non-gay viewers. And because gay movies appear to have a loyal fan base among the homosexual community, theatres are happy to release them despite their independent status and low-profile.

*Rainbow Boy Rung Tua Thi Paet Khong Khwam Rak* and *Club M2* have been screened only at House theatre, which mostly screens non-blockbusters, and whose highest gross has been Taiwanese gay film *17 Sai . . . Rak Nai Mai Mi Buea* (Formula 17, D.J Chen and Ying-jung Chen, 2004) while other gay films this year have shown in many cinema complexes in the city. Paul Bradley, one of the producers of both *Rainbow Boy Rung Tua Thi Paet Khong Khwam Rak* and *Club M2* mentions,

Rainbow Boys was aimed particularly at a gay audience, but we attempted a crossover to general audiences with Club M2, Most movies featuring gay characters done by big studios are made for straight people to feel superior to gays. What we're doing here is trying to change the image of gay people. (Bradley in Kong, 2007b)

Yet there seems to be no Brokeback Mountain positioned gay movie in Thailand, rather gay-audience-orientated small indies or comical gay protagonists for non-homosexual laughter. The commercial trend of gay movies gives an opportunity for both indie and blockbuster to consider opposite sexuality. Recent smash hit *Kho Hai Rak Chongcharoen* (Me ... Myself, Pongpat Wachirabunjong, 2007), a story of a transvestite man with amnesia starring Ananda Everingham, one of the new rising Thai actors, is neither comic nor sticking to gayness. Meanwhile *Phuean...Ku Rak Mueng Wa* (Bangkok Love Story, Poj Arnon, 2007) is a male homoerotic film screened widely in cinema complexes. The film melodramatically portrays the accidental love between a closeted-married-man and a hit man asked to kill him. Even though the film includes unrealistic portrayals but it seriously looks at homosexuality in Bangkok, addressing issues of HIV/AIDS and discriminations against people with HIV/AIDS. This kind of movie could be a possible

start to changing the image of gay and lesbians in Thai society.

## 6.4 Conclusion

Historically, the notion of Thai gender and sexuality was set in the era of modernization, when Siamese elites thought their women with *jongrabben* and exposure of breasts as barbarism. Nithi points out, adoption of Western fashion in late nineteenth to early twenties centuries has changed the Thai notion of obscenity, as bared bodies in public was not unusual in pre-modern Thai culture, pointing to, for example mural paintings at Buddhist temples (1990:94 cited in Jackson, 2002). However, as Jackson (2002:207) says, “all visual representations of the genitals or sex play in Buddhist temples and other public spaces ceased in the second half of the nineteenth century, as Western notion of public modesty and propriety were adopted along with Western fashion”. Even though there is some evidence of female homosexual behavior called *len phuen*, literally play with friends, in Buddhist temple murals, still homosexuality is considered as a non-Thai concept (Sinnott, 2004).

Despite the myth of Thailand as a homosexual-friendly country, the notion of image in Thai concept, or what Jackson calls “Thai regime of image”(2004), has forced homosexuals, especially homoerotic gay and lesbian, to be in the closet (private), and are pressured not to let them be open (public). Recent arrival of gay-themed independent films, especially the message that homosexuality should not be concealed, are challenges to the notion of Thai sexuality and image. However, with the lack of serious homophobic experience and legal and religious sanctions, Thai queer cinema has never been politicized.

In particularly, these films, centering on sexuality as identity are paralleled to the Western concept of gay and lesbian, and can be analyzed to be one aspect of globalization or what Altman (1996) calls “the internationalization of gay identities”. Yet a series of new emergent queer films search for their sexual identity as well as their gender preference (more feminine or more masculine). This is probably a Thai localized feature with a global concept of homosexuality.

Moreover, Thai independent queer films seem to function as a space for their

self-expression, in other words, the indie film scene creates the queer space for people who cannot express their sexual identity in the mainstream industry. Different from virtual queer space on internet, a filmmaker put him/herself into the public sphere, therefore, it becomes a challenge against a Thai regime of image.

The recent boom of gay films by mainstream film productions holds some potential to change the general image of homosexuality in the country. Not only big-budgeted movie directors but also gay-oriented filmmakers seem to take this chance to appeal to a heterosexual audience. If a film like a Thai Brokeback Mountain appears, appealing to both homosexual and heterosexual audiences, the image of homosexuality might be modified and allowed to be in public officially.



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## CHAPTER VII

### ORGANIC INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITIES IN CONTEMPORARY THAI ARTS

This chapter examines the role of the emergent arts and artists, which we have seen in the independent films and its auteurs as examples in the previous chapters, and place them in the sphere of cultural politics in Thailand. Knowledge about contemporary Thai independent film was obtained through participation in the Thai Film Foundation's celebrative 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Thai short and video festivals, and with maintaining close companying with the people around the Foundation. This has revealed the existence of informal communities in Thai independent film world. Not only the compass of Thai indie films, but also the careful examination on Thai contemporary arts, exhibits the actualities of coteries in the arena. This chapter summarizes contemporary Thai arts communities with the concept of intellectuals and identities. Finally the chapter attempts to analyze whether the actualities of coteries is called a movement.

#### 7.1 Thai Contemporary Artists as Organic Intellectuals

As we have seen previously, some independent filmmakers are challenging the hegemonic norm of national images, namely national identity (in Chapter IV), relational self-positioning (in Chapter V), and sexuality (in Chapter VI), based on a-century-ago Siamese ruling class elites' ambitions and then accumulated or modified in the history of Thai cultural politics.

Antonio Gramsci (1971:3) wrote "all men are potentially intellectuals in the sense of having an intellect and using it, but not all are intellectuals by social functions". He analyzed the roles of intellectuals as traditional and organic. Traditional intellectuals are professional intellectuals such as religious leaders and professors, what we usually imagine from the word, "whose position in the interstices of society has a certain inter-class aura about it but derives ultimately from past and present class relations and conceals an attachment to various historical class formation" (Gramsci 1971:3). On the

other hand, organic intellectuals are “distinguished less by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class, than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong” (Gramsci 1971:3). Similarly Edward Said (1994) suggests an intellectual who has “a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public; this person confronts orthodoxy and dogma, representing people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug; and this person does so on the basis of universal principles” (p11-12). According to him, intellectuals are the ones who speak the truth to power.

This study categorizes some independent filmmakers as organic intellectuals. As “Apichatpong’s work has gained international recognition as Thai art cinema that gestures toward contemporary Thai subjectivities on the margins” (Sudarat, 2007:49) or Thunskana wants to unveil the realities of Thai youth, they locate their works within the dominant society, therefore their works are not just aesthetic products but deliver social comments to represent their identity and sympathized people. As a result, the artists, as examined in the previous chapters, comment on the attitude of Thai hegemony. The artists speak the other truth to the power.

## **7.2 Identity Politics in the Thai Contemporary Arts and Artists**

The works of independent filmmakers, however, do not directly oppose the hegemonic mainstream subjectivities. They are challenging Thai hegemony by representing the others, such as the rural, immigrant Burmese, Thai Muslims, and homosexuality. Consequently, the independent filmmakers do not appear radically political at all. Especially when compared to the films-for-life movement in the 1970s, which was influenced by politicized student uprising and directly referred to political issues, their films do not convey strong political message. The question here is whether the independent arts and artists can be called an art movement the same as the movement three decades ago. Obviously the new indie arts are less political than the art-for-life movement in the 1970s however they gain a sense of politics. This thesis argues that this new art phenomenon is a different kind of cultural politics from the 1970s, of which

art-for-life movement reflected Socialism in the time when the world was under the Cold War. On the other hand, the new emergent filmmakers and their works are not related to, at least outwardly, 'one' specific political ideology, however, I would like to argue that the new art movement in the sphere is a different type of cultural politics, that is, identity politics.

The notion of cultural identity is traditionally understood as fixed and coherent to the past (Storey, 2003). However, recent theoretical works of Stuart Hall (1996:6) suggested that cultural identity is also grounded in the future, or what he says "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us". These ideas, regarding cultural identity, are often understood as the roots and routes of identity, respectively. (Woodward, 2002, Storey, 2003). The roots of cultural identity, according to John Storey (2003), exist in "collective memory" or the past, and Kath Woodward (2002) correlates the roots of identity with the idea of essentialism. In Thai discourse, the roots of cultural identity are probably rooted in royalist nationalist historiography, which played an important role in Thai nation-building era as analyzed in Chapter IV. The historical narratives, or legends, of King Naresuan, Queen Suriyothai or Bangrajan villagers are learned in school textbooks of history and become a symbol of Thai national heroes. On the other hand, the routes of cultural identity mean that identity is not only grounded in the past, but also in the future or in our desire. In the era of globalization, the idea of identity as the routes may correlate to cosmopolitanism, that is, recognizing the existence of different identities. Cosmopolitan identity will be discussed later in this chapter. Hall (1996:4) mentioned, "identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves". He also pointed out that a matter of identities is becoming more about "routes" than "roots".

In the era of globalization, this sounds true in Thailand. As the globalization, which produced transnational economy and resulted in the economic crisis, brought the threat of Thai national identity, which is embedded in roots of cultural identity, Thai hegemony attempted to build and strengthen Thai national identity by applying the notion once old Siamese/Thai elites had used to create the citizens. This works very well as

reviewed some successful mainstream movies as a case study. However, in the era of globalization, not all the Thais felt threat of national identity, but some found their identities through their routes.

Apichatpong, a grown-up in provincial Khon Kaen city, portrayed the everyday life of the rural in *Dokfa Nai Mue Man* (Mysterious Object at Noon, 2000), *Sut Saneha* (Blissfully Yours, 2002) and *Sat Pralat* (Tropical Malady, 2004), which contrast well with official narcissistic amazing Thainess. Likewise, in the Buddhist dominant country, Bangkok-Muslim Panu Aree described the viewpoints of four Bangkok-Muslims in his documentary film, *Khaek* (In-between, 2006). A Chiang Rai-native, Urupong Raksasat, filmed the life of his people, who are often portrayed as a comical clown in Thai mainstream movies, in *Rueang Lao Chak Mueang Nuea* (Stories from the North, 2006) while Indian-Thai contemporary artist Navin Rawanchaikul created a video art featuring his Indian-ness, which is usually regarded as a typical un-Thainess. Gay-identified Thunskha challenges the state censorship by expressing naked male body in his works. These artists did not encounter the crisis of Thai national identity but faced the threat of their identity brought by Thai hegemony. As seen in the previous chapters, the new independent artists apply their cultural identity to their filmic works, and represent their subject. Storey (2003) mentions, “who we are is always a compromise between how we see ourselves and how we are seen by significant others. Identities are, therefore, a mixture of “interpellation”<sup>1</sup> and “representation””. In this sense, the filmic works of the independent filmmakers are reasonable to be considered in the identity politics

In the 1970s’s art-for-life movement, it was also true that many artists originally came from the rural area and sympathized and fought for the exploited there. It was probably a kind of identity politics as well, however, it was also linked with larger political movements of class struggle in the ideological discourse, namely, Communism and anti-Communism<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, the emergent contemporary Thai arts deal with different subjects of the marginal, including ethnicity, religious group, gender, sexuality,

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<sup>1</sup> Interpellation is a concept first coined by Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser to describe the process by which ideology addresses the (abstract) pre-ideological individual thus effectively producing him as subject proper. (wikipedia, accessed October, 2007)

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter II for the art-for-life movement, and Chapter V for the film-for-life movement in the 1970s.



and class, which they belong to or sympathize, and these arts are not linked with any political movement.

The Spoken Silence program and the 11<sup>th</sup> Thai short film and video festival<sup>3</sup> addressed some political issues, however, under the post-coup situation at the time and the state censorship, the artists used indirect expression to show their stance, differently from the direct political messages in the art-for-life works made in the period of lifted censorship between 1973 to 1976. As reviewed the Rajabhat case in Chapter VI, Thai gay right movement was inactive unless their rights were threatened. Similarly, ethnic minorities and Muslims are not directly discriminated by the Thai state, therefore, the emergent artists and their works do not retain overt political sentiment, and are not paralleled with any political movement. As argued in the previous chapters, many contemporary artists challenge Thai social norms, which are based on Thai hegemonic power. This is counter-hegemonic expression, which may not be seen as directly attacking state/official discourse but these artists are subtly resisting state domination.

### **7.3 Aesthetic Identity of Thai Contemporary Artists**

Cultural identity is, as proposed by Hall (1996) and other cultural theorists, not only grounded in roots but also in routes, that is, variant identities, not only one fixed identity, exist in each person. As an artist who gained art education at high institution, it is natural and also important to think that their identity as an artist is dominant over other identities. As examined in the Chapter III, the new emergent artists struggle not only against hegemonic social norms but also in their artistic expression. For example, some independent filmmakers addressed political issues in their works in the Spoken Silence program but their styles were different from the 1970s' films-for-life modernist films. It is, on the one hand, probably due to the censorship after the coup in 2006. At the same time, on the other hand, they also search their cinematic style to express political messages, and this style is not necessarily same as the realism one in the 1970s. Metaphoric approach may be their artistic style. Apichatpong says, "I am interested in social issues but I am not

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter V for details.

going to portray them directly.”<sup>4</sup> (Apichatpong in Esquire Japan, 2004: 169). This study suggests the importance to look at both social and aesthetic role of the artists, or what and how they express, to find out whether these arts and artists are called a movement.

## **7.4 Thai Intellectual Communities in Thai Contemporary Arts**

In this section, some major groups existed in the sphere of the contemporary Thai arts are introduced and examined. They are not necessarily official or formal and the study analyzes it is a new concept of grouping or community, which is based on their identities, and different from traditional Thai way of factionalism.

### **7.4.1 Thai Film Foundation Group**

A close observation of the Thai Film Foundation reveals the existence of a community over the name of the Foundation but it includes filmmakers, journalists, scholars as well as Film Foundation staff. With the project director of the Thai Film Foundation, Chalida Uabumrungjit, as a center of the circle, people like independent filmmakers Pimpaka Towira and Panu Aree, film critic Kong Rithee, journalist Noy Thrupkaew, foreign film writer Robert Williamson, film lecturer Sanchai Chotirosseranee, are frequent visitors to the Film Foundation and sometimes function as a temporary unofficial staff to support the Foundation. They are close enough to call each other *Phi* (older brothers, sisters) or just by nickname. Chalida, Sanchai and Robert were students of Film at the University of the East Anglia, United Kingdom. Kong and Robert have been contributing English articles for the Film Foundation’s website, while film critic Kong’s articles in Bangkok Post newspaper, include ones about independent films as well as mainstream, which is conducive to a prevalence of independent film culture into the mass media through one of the leading newspapers in the kingdom. Pimpaka and Panu, both filmmakers, their works were screened at a special program of the regular short film festival organized by the Foundation. Panu’s *Khaek (In-Between)*, 2006 on the life of Muslims in Bangkok was shown in 10<sup>th</sup> film festival while Pimpaka’s latest documentary

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<sup>4</sup> Translated by author of this thesis

film *The Truth Be Told* (The Truth Be Told, 2007), the life of Supinya Klangnarong, who became a symbol of freedom of expression after being sued by Shin Corp., ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra's company, was first screened as a part of 11<sup>th</sup> short film festival in September 2007.

The Thai Film Foundation was established as a non-profit organization by film activists in 1994, it works closely with the National Film Archive of Thailand<sup>5</sup>, in order to promote the importance of film preservation and film history as well as film culture in the country. The Foundation encourages Thai film as intellectual properties by publishing a film journal, *Nang Thai* (Thai Film Quarterly), and welcomes film scholars to use their resources. As the website of Thai Film Foundation mentions clearly "Since Thai Film Foundation has considered cinema as intellectual asset rather than merely entertainment, the Foundation has organized numerous activities, working towards raising the recognition of Thai films to become one of the country's cultural heritage"(Thai Film Foundation, 2007.), the foundation has become a symbol of non-mainstream and non-entertainment-oriented film culture to encourage independent films which have rarely worked as a part of the commercial film industry.

People around the foundation, no matter whether they officially belong to the foundation, share the idea of Thai cinema as an intellectual asset, which challenges the commercial-oriented mainstream films. Sometimes, they consequently criticize what has been expressed in the mainstream movies, which was discussed in the previous chapters, through the written works of the members. For example, some Kong's critiques, which have been addressed many times in this thesis, specifically are questioning the portrayals by mainstream films.

Chalida and Sanchai have contributed their film works, *Silence in D minor* (Silence in D minor, Chalida Uabumrungjit, 2006), and *Chamloei Rak* (The Love Culprit, Sanchai Chotirosseranee, 2006) to the Spoken Silence program, which demonstrated implicit political sentiment three months after the coup in 2006. Pimpaka plans to shoot a new film called The Island Funeral, young Bangkok Muslim woman's self-searching road movie, written by film critic Kong Rithee, who is also a Bangkok Muslim.

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<sup>5</sup> Thai Film Foundation and The National Film Archive of Thailand were located close to each other in Nakhonpathom province, suburb near Bangkok.

One interesting characteristic of the community is that even though there seem to be certain commonalities among them, such as the same educational background and attitude toward the film culture, it is not a formal group but is tacitly understood to be part of the community. In this sense, membership is rather self-acknowledged and once become a member, everyone helps each other.

#### **7.4.2 Chiang Mai Based Contemporary Arts Group**

In his study on the new type of Thai artists, Pandit Chanrochanakit (2006) concluded that internationally well-known Thai artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Navin Rawanchaikul, Montien Boonma, and Araya Rasdjamreansook “create a possibility of challenging, criticizing, and expanding the field of the national imaginary” (2006:vii). As himself a native of Chiang Mai, Pandit openly says that Navin is his good friend since schooldays in the city and he got close to Rirkrit through Navin. Montien and Araya were instructors at the faculty of Fine Art at Chiang Mai University where Navin worked close with as a student. The dissertation of Pandit speaks for the artists whose works were sometimes misunderstood or criticized, and argues how their works are challenging the official national imaginary exemplified by dominant neo-traditional art, which utilized Lanna-ness<sup>6</sup>.

Even though there is no official or formal group of the artists who are based on Chiang Mai city, but Navin’s closeness or respect to Rirkrit, Araya, and the late Montien, or the Land Project<sup>7</sup> by Rirkrit and another Chiang Mai based Kamin Lertchaiprasert, reveals the existence of a Chiang Mai based artist community. With Pandit’s study, the artists are intelligibly understood for their challenging position against hegemonic Thai national imaginary or what Pandit calls “Siamese Diorama”. An informal group of artists and academics seem to function as organic intellectuals.

The Chiang Mai based artists addressed here are well known internationally. Especially, Rirkrit, Navin and Kamin are recognized as Thai contemporary artists worldwide by their conspicuous art styles such as cooking-as-art, farming-as-art and

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<sup>6</sup> Lanna is a name of a kingdom, which existed in Northern Thailand around Chiang Mai city from 13<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century until it was officially annexed to Siam.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter III for detail

taxi-as-art-space, in other words, they emancipate and deconstruct the rigid traditional idea of art and art space. Pandit (2006) mentioned that Montien as a lecturer at the Fine Art Department of Chiang Mai University, who himself also attempted to find new artistic styles by using local materials instead of oil, or scented media, encouraged his students experimental artistic approach. Navin was one of those who was influenced by Montien as an art student. Chiang Mai based contemporary art group may inherit this experimental art spirit from the late Montien Boonma.

### 7.4.3 Thaiindie

Thaiindie is a non-profit group of Thai independent filmmakers. Established in late 2004, there are presently more than thirty independent filmmakers in their list. Thunskas Pansittivorakul<sup>8</sup>, a leader of the group, says their aim is “to be the center of Thai independent filmmakers whose films are unique and different from most mainstream and formulaic themes.”(thaiindie website) The identity of the group centers on the spirit of indie and counter-mainstream, and they promote Thai independent films both domestically and internationally. Thunskas says, “We just want to offer some diversity, and make people know that there are so many good filmmakers here who are even better than me. That’s why I’ve formed this group of filmmakers who are absolutely the opposite of what we have in the market right now.”(thaiindie website). Internationally recognized new emergent Thai independent filmmakers Anucha Boonyawatana<sup>9</sup> and Uruphong Raksasad<sup>10</sup> belong to the thaiindie as well.

Having many young filmmakers with independent spirit, thaiindie offers many works, which reflect the thaiindie-group filmmakers’ honest and natural feeling and personal interest as their young generation. Thaiindie has released three DVDs of their collective works, and two of them are about love, namely “Distance of Intimacy” and “Male Seduction<sup>11</sup>”. It is noticeable that Thunskas and Anucha, both internationally known independent filmmaker of Thai queer cinema, belong to this group as well as a

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<sup>8</sup> See chapter XI

<sup>9</sup> See chapter XI

<sup>10</sup> See chapter X

<sup>11</sup> “Male Seduction” is a collective work of Anucha Boonyawatana.

recent winner of documentary film award at the 11<sup>th</sup> Thai short film and video festival, Vichart Somkaew, who made *Rueang Ching* (One True Thing, 2006-2007), a homosexuality-confession documentary work.

Different from the former two communities, thaiindie has a formal name and seems to function as an organization under the young filmmakers' independent spirit.

#### 7.4.4 SOI Project

Introduced in Chapter III, SOI project is a group of Thai and Japanese creators, including independent musicians, a comedian, a cartoonist, visual artists, all integrated by a shared creativity and sentiment of Thai *sanook* or fun to collaborate each other. As an artist/comedian Udom Taephanich and visual artist Pinnaree Sunpitak joined in the project at Yokohama Triennale in 2005, and world famous Japanese contemporary artist Yoshitomo Nara participated in “Temporary Art Museum SOI Sabai” (2006) in Bangkok. The members of SOI project are not constant, but, as its name says “project”, each project has different members, except for core members such as Wit Pimkanchanapong or Wisut Ponnimit.

As the project began as a music festival, one characteristics of SOI project is the idea of popular music as art. Many of Thai musicians joined in SOI project are from independent music labels, such as Modern Dog of Bakery Music, and Penguin Villa of Small Room. Not only music-as-art, SOI project also welcomed a comedian Udom and a cartoonist Wisut as an artist. As long as it is creative and *sanook*, SOI project does not matter what kind of background each creator built up for their career.

#### 7.4.5 Project 304

Project 304 is a group of contemporary artists and curators. The project includes filmmaker Apichatpong Weelasetakul, conceptual artist Michael Shaowanasai<sup>12</sup>, and curator Gridthiya Gaweewong, (three of them are graduates from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago) and according to their official website (Project 304 website), there

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<sup>12</sup> See chapter XI

are seven more artists as founding members, including the late Montien Boonma. Launched as an alternative space in late 1996, it aims “to use art as a means to bring greater awareness and appreciation of the contemporary arts to society at large.”(Project 304 website). Presently, their exhibition space is inoperative but project 304 functions as a project-based art organization working for the Bangkok Experimental Film Festival, and publication of Bang art magazine. Currently, the group is inactive but each member is working actively as we have seen some of the artists, namely Apichatpong and Michael, in the previous chapters. Gridthiya works at the Jim Thompson Art Center, one of the leading art spaces in Thailand.

#### **7.4.6 Thai Collectivism and Thai Contemporary Arts Communities**

Even though there have not been many studies on Thai collectivism or factionalism, some scholars, especially those who are in the field of social science, point out there exists Thai specific way of collectivism or factionalism and it plays an important role in Thai society.

In the study on education in Thailand, Janice Burn and Naline Thongprasert (2005) analyze Thai collectivism using Thai term “Kamlangjai”, literally moral support, and say that collectivism is an important factor of Thai culture to implement successful virtual education. In the sociological research on motivation of municipal governmental workers, Gamolporn Sonsri (2006) also introduces Thai collectivist idea as a significant Thai cultural factor to encourage them to work.

On the other hand, Thai factionalism based on the idea of hierarchy and patron-client system is pointed out by academics of Thai politics. William Klausner (1993) states the motivation of clique formation is personal interests and the enhancement of power and cites some political factions such as Chulachomkhalo Military Academy Classes 5 and 7 as examples. Witthaya Sucharitanarugse (1997) uses the Thai term “*phuak*”, often translated into group, clique or circle, to describe the Thai concept of collective behavior and explains the characteristics of *phuak* is that it is “not a formal group” (1997:6), and it “may or may not have its own name”, and defines “a pattern of relationship built upon personal ties with certain frame of reference utilized as basis of

action for the benefit of individual and the entity”(1997:6). Witthaya (1997) also emphasizes characteristics that are “devoid of ideological commitment ” but “purely utilitarian”. Likewise, Michael Nelson (2007:8) also finds the significance of *phuak* in Thai politics as he said, “Instead of formal political party structures or citizen-directed political activities, we find informal—meaning essentially private and exclusive, mostly invisible—local political groups or cliques, called *phakphuak* or *phuak* in Thai”. Even though Nelson’s analysis is also limited to the area of Thai politics, he also adds, “This kind of informal grouping is a general feature of Thai social organization” (2007:9).

Even in the arena of Thai art, Steven Pettifor (2003) mentions that there has been a trend to make a group among young artists to struggle in the hierarchical order in Thai art world in the last decade. According to Pettifor (2003:23), “In the hierarchy of Thai art, established veterans typically dominate the nation’s more reputable exhibition venues -- younger unrecognized artist find it difficult to get a foothold in this strict pecking order. Therefore, the favoured route towards asserting oneself is through the numerous annual art competitions, or by banding together in groups, hoping that there’s publicity in numbers. In the last decade, numerous groups have appeared and dissipated, a lack of cohesion and individual agendas making them fleeting, but there have been exception”.

The concept of informal group or collectivism is certainly an important aspect of Thai culture, however, this study analyzes that the communities of Thai contemporary artists examined above are different from this hierarchy and patron-client system based factionalism or *phuak*.

As reviewed above, the independent artists make a community based on shared (aesthetic) identities or ideology. As an observer in the Thai Film Foundation group, I found that the members call each other with *Phi* (older brothers, sisters) or just by nicknames, and the group is casual and friendly, which is different from the concept of patron-client system. Their informality is not because they form an exclusive clique behind a formal structure, but they create a community or community-like group, which is rather inclusive, as the name “project” shows, as long as they share identities or ideology. In other words, this is a new type of grouping in Thailand, which is different from the old concept of Thai factionalism and patron-client system. The study finds that globalization has created this new group of artists because they are a new generation of



artists (and curators, journalists or any occupation) whose identity and artistic experiences are formed by the forces of globalization, which will be discussed further in the later part.

## **7.6 Collaborations among Thai Contemporary Arts Communities**

This new idea of community/grouping is also observable in collaborations that extend beyond each group. It is reasonable because they share common ideas as marginal in both social and aesthetic sphere including anti-exclusivity, as analyzed in the previous chapters. Chapter III have already given some examples of collaborations beyond the frame of group. For example, Apichatpong's filmic work *Ghost and Asia* (*Ghost and Asia*, 2005) was a part of SOI projects in "Temporary Art Museum SOI Sabai" (2006). This section briefly examines their collaborative work beyond a group and analyzes how ideology of each group was negotiated. Here, The Bangkok Democracy in 2005, or The Bangkok Experimental Film Festival, will be examined as one example.

The Bangkok Experimental Film Festival was launched by Project 304 and Thai Film Foundation in 1997. The festival has taken place four times until the time of this writing (2nd in 1999, 3rd in 2001, and 4th in 2005). This may be called an example of collaborations between art and film, here, Project 304, a group of contemporary artists, and independent-film-centered Thai Film Foundation. This also reveals a blurred distinction between art and film. The 4<sup>th</sup> Bangkok Experimental Film Festival took place as a part of "The Bangkok Democracy" program, which included film screenings, workshops and lectures.

In an interview<sup>13</sup> at the Bangkok Democracy, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Rirkrit Tiravanija answer to the question what the definition of art and film now, and the difference from the 1960s. Apichatpong, on the one hand, says,

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<sup>13</sup> Email Conversation between Rirkrit Tiravanija and Apichatpong Weerasethakul on Art, Film & Etc, facilitated by Gridthiya Gaweewong (Bangkok Democracy, 2005)

Personally I really appreciate living, the fact that I breathe. I think everything is beautiful, is art. So film medium is part of the art – and it is everywhere, whether it is Hollywood film, music videos, the news, etc. Nowadays, kids can make their own films. This was not the case in the 60s. I think it has become a very easy and democratic medium. (Apichatpong in Bangkok Democracy, 2005)

On the other hand, Rirkrit answers,

Yes, like Marcel Duchamp would have said, " I rather breathe than make art...", there are too many trying to make definitions when there is only life. I think perhaps one could rethink what is mainstream and what is experimental, but all that, as Joei<sup>14</sup> says everyone can make their own movie, so in the end perhaps it's about transmission. It's all more real but its also not, its all more art but its also not. Perhaps the differences from the 60's is speed, we have more speed and information is driven by that idea. Its necessary to think and rethink the approach to ones own time and place, and perhaps life. (Rirkrit in Bangkok Democracy, 2005)

Rirkrit also mentioned about his preference of collaboration with other artists and audience, "it is a process of what I do that I like to work collaboratively. I think with the generation of artists I know many of us share our ideas and thoughts and often a work is arrived from this sense of community." (Bangkok Democracy, 2005)

The remarks of Apichatpong and Rirkrit above show an emergence of new film style, a medium of transmission in the time of speed and information in Rirkrit's words, or it probably can be said, a medium to tell one's identity in the era of globalization. At the same time, Rirkrit's statement about his preference of collaborative works shows that there are certain philosophies shared among the generation, which enhance the collaboration opportunities among them. Even though each group deals with a different media, namely, film, art and popular culture (music, cartoon and so on) on its appearance, their collaboration works were initiated by their common ideas among the creators, and there are chances of collaboration for the future as well.

### **7.7 Emergence of New Thai Contemporary Arts and Artists**

In the previous sections, the actualities of informal/formal Thai contemporary art groups were reviewed. Even though all the groups seem to have a different goal, ideology and style, they aim to affect an impact on Thai society by using arts, and the analysis in

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<sup>14</sup> Joei is Apichatpong's nickname.

the preceding chapters shows that they function as a social commentator, or a group of organic intellectuals. Since they are different from old concept of factionalism in the way that the group is normally open to newcomers, they also work collaboratively with other groups. With such phenomena over Thai contemporary art world, the question in this final section is whether we can regard it as a movement. This section summarizes their characteristics, and analyzes their emergence, together with the possibility to recognize them as a movement.

The study, as introduced in the Chapter I, looks at globalization as an important factor to bring both the rise of Thai official hegemony and the emergence of the new independent artists. Economically, globalization has brought not only foreign investment into Thailand but also borderless economy, which enhanced Thai export-oriented industry. As a result, Thailand enjoyed its economic boom and a number of middle class or new riches were born in this time. At the same time, globalization, culturally, brought the so-called “global culture” together with cable TV and internet. The importance of globalization in this study is, it allowed Thai people to have new multiple identities, not only grounded in its roots, but also in its routes. Many of the emergent artists are highly educated in art studies at a university, and some of them even study abroad, mostly in the Western countries. On the one hand, this direct (through studying in a foreign country, or even foreign-educated lecturers in domestic institution) and indirect (through cable TV and internet) cultural influence of globalization as their routes caused the artists to have multiple identities, including Western idea of homosexuality (as identity) or cosmopolitanism as well as cutting-edge aesthetic identities, such as post-modern, avant-garde and so on. On the other hand, the majority of Thais felt the globalization is a threat to Thai national identity. Hence the Thai state made serious attempt to promote a national identity through the portrayal of official Thainess in film.

While mainstream cinema utilized the official Thai national identity and the dominant ideology (on ethnicity, class, or sexuality), independent filmmakers applied more personal and marginalized identities, which are not necessarily singular, into their subjectivities such as ruralness, Muslimness, *khaekness*, and homosexuality. As a result, their film works function as a social commentator.

Apichatpong says that his films are one hundred percent personal, “It is true that

films are created for the masses, but I think that at present both the filmmaker and the viewer want more personalization” (Apichatpong in s.i.am contemp, n.d.). Prabda wrote a short story called *barami*, literally prestige, which satirically portrayed Prabda himself, who was often criticized as his father’s coattail<sup>15</sup>. Wisut’s cartoon also reflects his daily life as he says, “(a heartwarming character) Mamuang-chan was born because I lived and drew it in Japan where I see many heartwarming people”<sup>16</sup> (Wisut in Gallery Tagboard, 2006).

Many independent documentary films face the identity of the director him/herself or the people the director identified him/herself with. *Rueang Ching* and *My First Boyfriend* (*My First Boyfriend*, Issara Maneewat, 2004) search for the director’s identity as homosexual in the films. Muslim-born Panu Aree’s *Khaek* (*In Between*, 2006) portrays the life of Muslim Bangkokians as he says, “After listening to what the subjects in my movie say, I realize that more or less those are the same things I want to say.” (Panu in Kong, 2006c). Chiang Rai-born Urupong Raksasat says that shooting the rural life of Northern Thailand is “his happiness” (Urupong in Kong, 2006e). In other words, the subjectivities of the independent artists are very personal and a film becomes a medium for self-expression.

On the other hand, aesthetically they share some characteristics such as DIY spirit, multi-media, collaboration, and experimental approach. These are also products of globalization as they acquired aesthetic sense or artistic techniques at a Western art institution or by Western-educated lecturers who studied in global cities, where postmodern, avant-garde, and experimental styles are widely recognized, such as New York, London, or Chicago. These experiences most likely influence their identities as an artist, as Montien Boonma encouraged his students to use experimental approach (Pandit, 2006) while Apichatpong says his early film works were influenced by avant-garde styles he was explored to in Chicago (May Adadol and MacDonald, 2006).

The group of contemporary artists under this study has moved away from the former tradition of patron-client or clique relationship. The characteristic of their

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<sup>15</sup> Prabda’s father, Suthichai Yoon is a famous editor of local English language newspaper “The Nation”. Suthichai is also known as an executive of the Nation Multimedia Group.

<sup>16</sup> Translated by author of this thesis.

organization is based on their field of education, international exposure, anti-hegemonic discourse, and their relationship is horizontal as opposed to the hierarchical relationships in the Thai social convention. These artists are connected through their commonality like regionalism such as Lanna-ness (Northern tradition), independent aesthetics, and cosmopolitan worldview.

The attributes of this group of young artists seem to demonstrate that they are forming a new kind of identity, one which is quite different from their predecessors, especially the mainstream film directors. Cosmopolitanism might be an applicable notion to understand this group of contemporary artists and their arts. Cosmopolitanism, according to John Tomlinson (1999), has two characteristics. First, it is “a keen grasp of a globalized world as one in which there are no others” (p.194). Second, it is “an awareness of the world as one of many cultural others” (p.194). This seems opposite ideas, but Tomlinson explains “cosmopolitans can recognize and value their own cultural dispositions and negotiate as equals with other autonomous locals”.

Globalization, including their experience outside of Thailand, brought about a sense of cosmopolitanism to the emergent new artists, and it is observable in their artworks. Thai hegemony, on the one hand, uses the notion of other (un-Thainess, others-within) to define Thainess by attacking or humiliating them. On the other hand, for the artists, the Burmese, Muslim, *kheak*, rural, homosexual, or any other marginal as well as Thai, Buddhist, *farang*, urban, heterosexual is one of autonomous different cultural others which they respect. That is why the works of the artists keep portraying the others, which is just defined by the hegemony and the artists do not think they are others, and still do not have any or much hostility against the mainstream. One reason why these internationally appreciated artists do not leave Thailand, and stay and keep creating there may be attributed to their cosmopolitan identity. They also recognize their own cultural disposition as a Thai although it is still just one of the cultural identities they hold.

This chapter concludes that these artists emerged from the birth of new identities politics (including politics of aesthetics) in the era of globalization. One of the important characteristics of the artists is their experience in global city outside of Thailand, such as New York, London, and Chicago, and as a result, the artists obtained cosmopolitan identity. This is why the artists express their identity, which is often regarded as other

from the mainstream, and response to the hegemony. That is to say, they do not look at a different identity as other, and it also reflects their grouping style, which is rather informal, inclusive, collaborative and horizontal. In terms of the so-called “ism” art movement, the analysis is not unable to come to a conclusion to define them. However, the characteristics examined above reveals the possibilities of movement for the future. Further research and observation how this phenomenon will evolve should be necessary to conclude whether it is an art movement or not.



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## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

There will be those who wonder why this matters; why an independent film-maker's movie getting shelved should be of concern to anyone. It's because what happens in the film industry shows us more than how the board of censors works. It shows us how Thailand works. And that really is important. (Apichatpong, 2007)

In April 2007, just before the cheerful watery Thai New Year holidays, a piece of news came out that the film of Apichatpong's new title *Saeng Satawat* (Syndromes and Century, 2006), was supposed to see its commercial release in the same month, however, it did not pass the Thai censorship board, which asked the four sensitive scenes be cut. These four scenes included scenes of a monk playing a guitar, a monk playing a radio-controlled aircraft, doctors drinking alcohol in the basement of a hospital, and a doctor kissing his girlfriend in a hospital. The director chose not to show the film in Thailand at all after the committee's decision, and asked the committee to return the print of film to him. However, the board insisted that they would not return the film without censoring the four scenes. This overbearing attitude of the censorship board has consequently ignited Thai cinephiles as well as film creators. The Free Thai Cinema Movement claiming the necessity of a rating system instead of cutting or banning films by the board, was launched by Bioscope Magazine, Thai Film Foundation and the Thai Film Directors' Association. Its web petition counts more than 7000 including international cinephiles, scholar and local film fans by the end of August 2007.

The episode vividly demonstrates that Thai cinema is still under hegemonic authority. The petition continues "It eludes us all why Thai cinema has continued to be systematically straightjacketed even though there have been several attempts by the film community of the past thirty years to campaign for the complete overhaul of the aforementioned Film Act, whose essence functions against the spirit of genuine democracy in all manners." The Thai Censorship Board operates based on the Film Act established in 1930 when the country was still ruled by Absolute Monarchy, and a question is who are the censorship board deciding the cuts and the bans of films. A film critic pointed out "Critics and parents recently expressed concern about the heavy use of vulgar language and rude behavior in films like *Bodyguard Na Liam 2* (The Bodyguard 2

Mum Jokmok, 2007) and *Ho Tao Taek* (Haunting Me, Poj Arnon, 2007), which attracted young audiences and were passed by censors.”(Kong, 2007a). The criteria of the censorship seem unclear. In the case of Apichatpong’s *Saeng Satawat*, doctors play an important role. Supawat Pothong, a representative of the Medical Council, attended the censorship board meeting and commented, “The scenes involving doctors are inappropriate... Drinking whisky in a hospital is not proper conduct by medical professionals... Sure, doctors can kiss their girlfriends. Doing that at home is all right, but doing it in a hospital is inappropriate.” (Supawat in Kong, 2007a). However, in the same year, we faced the commercial release of Thai horror flick *Suai Lak Sai* (Sick Nurses, Tosapon Siritwat and Peerapan Lhauyon, 2007), in which a doctor murders a nurse in a hospital. Can a doctor kill a nurse in a hospital but not kiss a girlfriend? What is questioned here is not whether Apichatpong’s film has become a target for the censorship board, but rather the question of the censorship criteria. If representatives of the medical council or Buddhist organizations are allowed to attend the censorship board meeting and give comment to expurgate parts of films, should the representatives of ethnic minority, rural people and homosexuals be able to do the same? The Thai Censorship Board comprises officials representing the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of University Affairs, the military, the Department of Religious Affairs, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Then, why did not films like *Mak Te Returns* (Lucky Loser, Ardisorn Trisirikasem, 2006) or *La - Tha - Phi* (Ghost Game, Sarawuth Wichiansan, 2006) receive any censorship or ban before the protest was launched by Lao or Cambodian officials? The censorship board also reminds us of the Thai regime of image, as they decide what should not be in public domain with the standards of ruling class committee members.

As we have seen in Chapters IV, V, and VI, Thai cinema is surrounded by Thai hegemonies, and the board of censorship is one clear and symbolic example. In the 11<sup>th</sup> short film festival organized by Thai Film Foundation, there was a film screening to promote Free Thai Cinema Movement directed by Pimpaka Towira before every program started. In the two minutes short film, not only the independent filmmakers such as Pen-ek Ratanaruang, and Wisit Sasanatieng, but also writer Prabda Yoon, musician Tanachai Uchin or Pod of Moderndog, and media activist Supinya Klangnarong were there to give a message. It shows that censorship is not only a matter of Thai cinema, but



also Thai arts and Thai media. Censorship may threaten the identities of the artists and its audiences by preventing freedom of expression as well as freedom of appreciation.

### **8.1 Summary and Findings**

This thesis examines the emergence and development of Thai contemporary arts and artists with the concept of hegemony. The study addresses three research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of these new types of arts and artists?
2. How has globalization influenced both mainstream arts/artists and newly emerging arts/artists?
3. How do the new emergent artists challenge hegemony?

Chapter II provides an overview of the history of cultural politics in Thailand from the 1930s to 1990s. By reviewing the history of cultural politics, it finds that the Thai states political and cultural discourse is based on the ideology of the nation, religion (Buddhism) and monarchy. The review also reveals the transition of cultural politics, from the state to the business with the rise of capitalism in Thailand after the student-led Socialism-oriented art-for-life movement was taken over by the coup in 1976.

Chapter III looks at the social context of Thai contemporary art and popular culture, namely indie culture boom and the rise of new emergent artists. This chapter attempts to answer the first research question; what the characteristics of these new types of arts and artists are. The examination of the artists shows that they have common aesthetical characteristics; DIY aesthetics, experimental approach, international exposure and success, multi-media, and collaboration. These features consequently blur the distinction between the traditional notion of art and popular culture. At the same time, their experimental approach is appreciated by non-Thai fans and makes their name known internationally.

The popularity of these artists in Thailand brought about new cultural phenomenon among Thai youth, indie boom together with DIY sentiment. The analysis of the indie movement partly answers the second research question; How globalization has influenced newly emerging arts/artists. The analysis reveals that indie boom is a

hybridized global culture, which was influenced by some aspects of globalization such as technology (internet, cable TV, digital camera) and Western-educated leading indie artists (Prabda Yoon, Pen-ek Ratanaruang, Apichatpong Weerasetakul), and influence of Western indie, as alternative rock style (Modern Dog) at the beginning of the boom.

Chapter IV to Chapter VI examines the film narratives of Thai post-crisis cinema, both mainstream and independent, from the perspective of Thai national identity, Thai relational worldview and sexuality. These chapters also address the question of globalization and its influence on mainstream arts/artists and the newly emerging arts/artists, and how the new emergent artists challenge hegemony.

Firstly, the analysis reveals that the globalization threatened Thai national identity and evoke the notion of modernization in mainstream Thai cinema. In order to raise nationalistic sentiment, mainstream cinema portrayed Thai national identity (Nation, Buddhism, Monarchy, Muay-Thai, Elephant, Traditional Culture) by using the narratives to conflict with un-Thainess (Burma, West, *farang*, and anyone who threaten Thainess). The movies adopt the royalist historiography, which built up in the nation-building era of Thailand. Second, with the international popularity of Thai cinema, Thai filmmaker now uses globalization for promotion of Thainess. Globalization also brought another notion of Thai modernization to Thai filmmakers' mind, the relational worldview, or quest for *siwilai*. The study shows that Thai mainstream films look at the rural and ethnic minorities as others within, or a target for comic relief. Similarly, Thai mainstream queer cinema uses *kathoe*y or transgender to generate laughter.

On the other hand, the analysis of Thai independent cinema shows that Thai independent filmmakers challenge the Thai mainstream subjectivities by representing otherness. These include the Burmese, Thai Muslim, *khaek*, rural, ethnic minority, and homosexuality. The study also reveals that the independent artists express their identities in their artworks, which is one of influences by globalization. In other words, global experiences give the artists the chances to have multiple identities as well as cosmopolitan identity. The artists' cosmopolitan thinking, there is no other in the world, also reflect their representations of the marginal subjectivities.

This study also shows that the artists are making more personal arts, based on their identities gained through their routes in the global era. In other words, the

filmmakers do not intend to entertain but to speak seriously to their audience. Likewise their audience do not expect to be entertained, but they want to listen to the creator's voice. That is to say, the new independent filmmakers offer the new way of appreciating a film, and so do the new practitioners in the genre of music, cartoon, and literature. They provide the new way of appreciation.

As one aspect of development of the Thai contemporary arts and artists, this study finds the existence of artist communities, which have impact to Thai society. These groups are informal, casual, inclusive, collaborative and horizontal as opposed to the Thai traditional factionalism based on hierarchy and patron-client relationship, and they are connected through the shared values.

These artists with global experience bring a new concept of art, relationship or new artistic style and subjectivities into Thai contemporary art sphere. The study between mainstream and independent reveals the possibilities that the new emergent arts and artists attempt to deconstruct various binary oppositions; Thainess and Un-Thainess, civilized and barbarian, heterosexual and homosexual, public and private, hierarchy and horizontal, and probably modern and post-modern. Soon or later, they may officially be entitled to be considered as a movement.

Presently what these arts and artists are facing is not only the state hegemony. As Chapter III suggested, independent arts, film and music are becoming a part of the commercialized industry. Sudarat (2007:258) concludes, "Thai independent films and Do-It-Yourself video are indeed exemplary of productive tensions between independent aesthetics and economic practices telling stories of new modern Thai subjectivities". The study of Apanich (2003) on Thai underground music also reveals involvement by mainstream commercial firms into the subculture. Apichatpong says, "Independent filmmaking will exist to counter-balance the market. It is a part of the business" (Apichatpong in Sudarat, 2007:251). As long as the artists live in a capitalist society, it is impossible to escape from economic practices, and in fact, the artists themselves attempt to manage and protect their arts by themselves. Apichatpong owns his production company whose name is "kick the machine"(www.kickthemachine) and Navin similarly has a company called Navin productions. Thunskaa, and new emerging independent

filmmakers, search for international grants and screenings through the thaiindie group. One of the issues the artists face is probably how they negotiate their identity/ideology and economic practices.

## 8.2 State Intervention in Thai Contemporary Arts

Since the establishment of the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture under the Ministry of Culture in 2001, the Thai state has been interested in the independent arts as well. Since 2004, the Office annually gives Silpathorn Awards presented to contemporary artists aged 30 to 50 who have constantly devoted and created works in the area of visual arts, literature, music, performing arts and film. For example former Silpathorn awards receivers in the film field in the last three years are Pen-ek Ratanaruang, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and Wisit Sasanatiang, those who have been examined in this thesis as the new emergent artists, and in 2007, Thunska Pansittivorakul was selected for the prize. Even though the works of Pen-ek and Wisit have started to appeal to a mass audience recently, in case of works by Apichatpong, only *Sat Pralat* (Tropical Malady, 2004) and *Huachai Thon Nong* (The Adventure of Iron Pussy, 2003) are available in DVD/VCD format in Thailand<sup>1</sup>. His first feature length film *Dokfa Nai Mue Man* (Mysterious Object at Noon, 2000) is only available in the United States DVD market while uncensored version of *Sut Saneha* (Blissfully Yours, 2002) can be purchased in France. The latest title *Saeng Satawat* has no plan to screen in Thailand after the censorship issue. Furthermore, the works of Thunska are almost impossible to find in the Thai film market. His series of short film becomes DVD format in Hong Kong, but none of them are available in Thailand except by watching them at alternative film screening occasions including the annual short film festivals. Thunska himself was surprised with his winning of the award, “(When he was nominated,) I implied to them that I preferred to have as little to do with the Ministry of Culture as possible. But two months later, they called again and informed me that I was the awardee, and one thing led to another. I thought of turning down the award, but it was too late because they had already informed the press.”

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<sup>1</sup> Apichatpong asked his fans not to watch Thai DVD/VCD version of *Sut Saneha* (Blissfully Yours, 2002) because of its censorship and color, which the director did not expect. See the website of kick the machine for details.

(Thunskas in Kong, 2007c)

The form of the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture obviously reveals the state's interest for the contemporary arts including independent films. It is probable that the government just cannot ignore the popularity of Thai contemporary arts outside the country. On the other hand, they may want to express their support to the contemporary arts in the international arena or even control the arts for such releases. This study does not examine the governmental policy toward the contemporary arts, however, the support and prize by the government to the artists, in spite of the artists' controversial subjectivities, is interesting to note. Apinan Poshyananda, a famous curator and art critic, who was a former Chulalongkorn University's associate professor and art director of the Art Center, is at present secretary-general of the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture. Apinan, who has curated many contemporary art exhibitions in his career, is well known in Thai art world and thought and respected as one of the most important curators in Thailand. With him as a secretary-general, the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture looks rather different from the conservative Thai hegemonic ministry. As awardee Thunskas admits, "There are forward-thinking people in the Ministry", however he continues,

But the conservative group is more dominant, and I've been very disappointed with them. Even in the video presentation on the awards night, they said that movies were a medium that should be used to promote Thai culture and to advertise "Thainess" to the world. This means they only see movies as a kind of product. For me movies are universal - art is universal. And yes, the quality of being universal may be able to complement this Thainess, but it's important that the agency steps away from this mantra of promoting traditional culture and sees the world with their eyes open. (Thunskas in Kong, 2007c)

This remarks of Thunskas sharply shows his cosmopolitan identity as an artist while Thai officials are stuck to Thai national identity. Phatarawadee Phataranawik (2007) comments on 2007's Silpathorn Awards, "The OCAC, with its mission to promote contemporary art and culture, especially controversial artists, and the dinosaurs at the Culture Ministry who continue to control and censor freedom of expression, should both fine-tune their work. It has become a critical issue." Now, there seems to be a tension within the Ministry of Culture as well.

### 8.3 Conclusion

Globalization has raised the question; what is a nation for? Since the concept of nation was born, people have stuck to it and see and distinguish the world with this concept. What comprises “Thai” still seems to be a big issue for the majority of Thais. At the same time, unstoppable globalization has carried global culture through internet or cable TV to Thailand. The tourism-oriented country enjoys the internationalism of big cities such as Bangkok, Phuket or Chiang Mai and the borderless economy has brought transnational firms to build factories up in the suburb of kingdom’s capital. On the other hand, newly rich Thais go out of the country and enjoyed critical western educations. They may have opportunities to gaze at their home country from different eyes. This study proposes that such aspects of globalization’s effect have added a new perspective to Thai arts and artists.

Often critical views question the double standards in Thailand such as co-existences of successful military coup and democracy, monarchy and democracy, and sex industry and censorship of nudity. These are usually explained a “Thai-style”. The co-existence of ideal and real has been tolerated as a Thai way for long, however, newly emergent intellectuals have been challenging this tradition. They are scholars referred to in this study such as Thongchai Winichakul, Pavin Chachavalpongpun and Giles Ji Ungpakorn, who were also educated in the Western institutions. Likewise this thesis looks at the new emergent artists, experienced as a marginal in the kingdom, such as rural-grown Apichatpong, Muslim Bangkokian Panu, international Thai Rirkrit, Indian-Thai Navin and gay-identified Thunskaa, who function as intellectuals in Said (1994) or Gramsci’s (1971) sense. At the same time, they are artists who tread on the international art stage and keep seeking anew their own style and challenging both Thai and non-Thai audience.

This study has explored the emergence and development of contemporary Thai artists in the time of globalization. It analyzes that the artists are struggling against the conventional concepts in both the aesthetical and political arena by representing peripheral identities with peripheral artistic styles.

For many foreign enthusiasts of Thai contemporary arts or independent films,

the fascination may be in its avant-garde, experimental or postmodern artistic style, which is far from what non-Thai audiences expect from a tourist destination Thailand. However, this study reveals that what they convey in the art forms is probably very Thai (although different from official Thainess). In the era of globalization, the notion of Thai identity in contemporary arts may still be hard to define.



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สถาบันวิทยบริการ  
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย



**APPENDIX**

สถาบันวิทยบริการ  
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

## APPENDIX

The list of cinema mentioned in the thesis (in alphabetical order).

| English title                   | Thai title            | Romanized Thai title         | Year | Director                     |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|------|------------------------------|
| 7 Pra Jan Ban                   | 7 ประจัญบาน           | 7Prachanban                  | 2002 | Chalerm Wongpim              |
| 7 Street Fighters               | 7 ประจัญบาน ภาค2      | 7Prachanban part 2           | 2005 | Chalerm Wongpim              |
| Admit                           | -                     | Admit                        | 2007 | Natthapon Timmuang           |
| Ahinsa ... Stop to Run          | อหิงสา จิ๊กโก๋ มีกรรม | Ahingsa Chikko Mi Kam        | 2005 | Kittikorn Kiasirikun         |
| Anna and the King               | -                     | -                            | 1999 | Andy Tennant                 |
| Bangrajan                       | บางระจัน              | Bangrajan(Bang Rachan)       | 2000 | Thanit Jintanukul            |
| Bangkok Love Story              | เพื่อน...กูรักมึงวะ   | Phuean . . . Ku Rak Mueng Wa | 2007 | Poj Arnon                    |
| Beautiful Boxer                 | บิวตี้ฟูล บ็อกเซอร์   | Beautiful Boxer              | 2003 | Eakkachai Aueklongdham       |
| Blissfully Yours                | สุดเสน่หา             | Sut Saneha                   | 2002 | Apichatpong Weerasethakul    |
| Born to Fight                   | เกิดมาลุย             | Koet Ma Lui                  | 2004 | Panna Rittikrai              |
| Box                             | กล่อง                 | Klong                        | 1998 | Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol |
| Boy's Love                      | -                     | Boy's Love                   | 2006 | Anucha Boonyawatana          |
| Brokeback Mountain              | หุบเขาเรนรัก          | Hupkhao Ren Rak              | 2005 | Ang Lee                      |
| Butterfly And Flower            | ผีเสื้อ และดอกไม้     | Phisuea Lae Dokmai           | 1985 | Euthana Mukdasanit           |
| Child of Sin                    | เด็กบาป               | Dek Bap                      | 2007 | Seri Lachonnabot             |
| Citizen Dog                     | หมานคร                | Ma Nakhon                    | 2004 | Wisit Sasanatieng            |
| Club M2                         | คลับเอ็ม 2            | Club M2                      | 2007 | Thunyathorn Sivanukroa       |
| Daeng Bailey and Young Gangster | 2499 อันธพาลครองเมือง | 2499Anthaphan Khrong Mueang  | 1998 | Nonzee Nimitbutr             |
| Daughter 1                      | เสียชาย1              | Siadai 1                     | 1995 | Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol |
| Daughter 2                      | เสียชาย2              | Siadai 2                     | 1996 | Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol |
| Down the River                  | ตามสายน้ำ             | Tam Sainam                   | 2004 | Anucha Boonyawatana          |



| English title   | Thai title                      | Romanized Thai title  | Year | Director                     |
|---|---------------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|
| Dr. Karn  | เขาค้อกานต์                     | Khao Chue Kan   | 1973 | Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol |
| Extinct   | กาลครั้งหนึ่งก่อนสิ้นชาติ       | Kan Khrang Nueng Kon Sin Chat   | 2006 | Kunwee Jundee                |
| Faith   | -                               | Faith   | 2006 | Apichatpong Weerasethakul    |
| Flood is Better Than Drought  | น้ำท่วมดีกว่าฝนแล้ง             | Namthuum Di Kwaa Fon Laeng  | 1942 | -                            |
| Formula 17  | 17 ไส...รักนายไม่มีเมื่อ        | 17 Sai . . . Rak Nai Mai Mi Buea  | 2004 | D.J Chen Ying-jung Chen      |
| Fun Bar Karaoke   | ฝันบ้า คาราโอเกะ                | Fun Bar Karaoke   | 1997 | Pen-Ek Rattanaurang          |
| Ghost Game  | ล่า-ท้า-ผี                      | La - Tha - Phi  | 2006 | Sarawuth Wichiansan          |
| Ghost of Asia   | -                               | Ghost of Asia   | 2005 | Apichatpong Weerasethakul    |
| Ghost Station   | โกยเถอะเก๋                      | Koi Thoe Ke   | 2007 | Yuthlert Sippapal            |
| Half Breed  | ข้าวนอกนา                       | Khao Nok Na   | 1975 | Piac Poster                  |
| Happy Berry   | -                               | Happy Berry   | 2004 | Thunskas Pansittivorakul     |
| Haunting Me   | หอนิ้วแตก                       | Ho Tao Taek   | 2007 | Poj Arnon                    |
| Hello Yasothorn   | แหยม ยโสธร                      | Yaem Yasothon   | 2005 | Mum Jokmok                   |
| Hi!   | -                               | Hi!   | 2006 | Bundit Thianrat              |
| Hotel Angel   | เทพธิดาโรงแรม                   | Thepthida Rongraem  | 1974 | Mom Chao Chatrichalerm Yukol |
| I Am a Man  | ฉันผู้ชายนะจะ                   | Chan Phuchai Na Cha   | 1987 | ML. Bandevanop Devakul       |
| I'm Lady  | ว้ายบีม...<br>(เชยร์กระหึ่มโลก) | Wai Buem...(Chia Krahuem Lok)   | 2003 | Poj Arnon                    |
| In-Between  | แขก                             | Khaek   | 2006 | Panu Aree                    |
| Invisible Wave  | คำพิพากษาของมหาสมุทร            | Khamphiphaksa Khong Mahasamut   | 2006 | Pen-Ek Rattanaurang          |
| Iron ladies   | สตรีเหล็ก                       | Satri Lek   | 2000 | Yongyooth Thongkonthun       |
| Iron ladies 2   | สตรีเหล็ก 2                     | Satri Lek2  | 2003 | Yongyooth Thongkonthun       |
| It is Possible That only Your Heart is Not Enough to Find You a True Love | -                               | It is Possible That only Your Heart is Not Enough to Find You a True Love | 2004 | Apichatpong Weerasethakul    |

| English title               | Thai title                                | Romanized Thai title                     | Year | Director  |
|-----------------------------|---|--|------|---|
| Jan Dara                    | จัน ดารา                                  | Jan Dara                                 | 2001 | Nonzee Nimibutr                                     |
| Khan Kluay                  | ก้านกล้วย                                 | Khan Kluay                               | 2006 | Kompin Khemkammerd                                  |
| Killer Tattoo               | มือปืน/โลก/พระ/จัน                        | Muepuen / Lok / Phra / Chan              | 2001 | Yuthlert Sippapak                                   |
| Kungfu Tootsie              | ตีคู่สู้ฟูต                               | Tat Su Fut                               | 2007 | Jaturong Mokjok                                     |
| Last Life in the Universe   | เรื่องรัก น้อย นิด มหาศาล                 | Rueang Rak Noi Nit Mahasan               | 2003 | Pen-Ek Rattanaaruang                                |
| Letter from Silence         | จดหมายจากความเงียบ                        | Chotmai Chak Khwam Ngiap                 | 2006 | Prap Bunpan   |
| Lucky Loser                 | หมางเตะ รีเทิร์นส                         | Mak Te Returns                           | 2006 | Ardisorn Trisirikasem                               |
| M.A.I.D                     | แจ้ว                                      | Chaeo                                    | 2004 | Youngyooth Thongkonthun                             |
| Mariya                      | มารีญา                                    | Mariya                                   | 2006 | Kanin Koonsumitrawong                               |
| Me ... Myself               | ขอให้รักจงเจริญ                           | Kho Hai Rak Chongcharoen                 | 2007 | Pongpat Wachirabunjong                              |
| Memoirs of a Geisha         | เมมมัวร์ส ออฟ อะ เกอิชา<br>นางโลมโลกจารึก | Memoirs of a Geisha Nang Lom Lok Charuek | 2005 | Rob Marshall  |
| Mercury Man                 | มนุษย์เหล็กไหล                            | Manut Leklai                             | 2006 | Bhandit Thongdee                                    |
| Metrosexual                 | แก๊งชะนีกับอีแอบ                          | Kaeng Chani Kap I Aep                    | 2006 | Yongyooth Thongkonthun                              |
| Moken, right?               | มอแกน, ปะ?                                | Moken pa?                                | 2007 | Phisan Sangjan, Taryart Datsathean, Nattawit Kaosri |
| Monrak Transistor           | มนต์รักทรานซิสเตอร์                       | Monrak Transistor                        | 2001 | Pen-Ek Rattanaaruang                                |
| Mountain People             | คนภูเขา                                   | Khon Phukhao                             | 1979 | Vichit Kounavudhi                                   |
| My First Boyfriend          | -   | My First Boyfriend                       | 2004 | Issara Maneewat                                     |
| Mysterious Object at Noon   | ดอกฟ้าในมือมาร                            | Dokfa Nai Mue Man                        | 2000 | Apichatpong Weerasethakul                           |
| Nang Nak                    | นางนาค                                    | Nang Nak                                 | 1999 | Nonzee Nimibutr                                     |
| New Born Blood              | โก๋หลังวัง                                | Ko Lang Wang                             | 2002 | Akarapol Akarasarane                                |
| Night Fight                 | นักบินกลางคืน                             | Nakbin Klangkhuen                        | 1941 | -   |
| Nong Teng Nakleng-Pukaotong | โหน่งเต่ง นักเลงภูเขาทอง                  | Nong Theng Nakleng Phukhaothong          | 2006 | Panitch Sodsi                                       |
| Noo-Hin the Movie           | หนูหิ้น เดอะ มูฟวี่                       | Noo-Hin the Movie                        | 2006 | Komgris Treewimol                                   |

| English title                 | Thai title                               | Romanized Thai title                             | Year      | Director                                   |
|-------------------------------|--|--|-----------|--|
| North Cold                    | หนาวเหนือ                                | Nao Nuea   | 2006      | Veramon Liptawat                           |
| Northeastern Son              | ลูกอีสาน                                 | Luk Isan   | 1982      | Vichit Kounavudhi                          |
| One True Thing                | เรื่องจริง                               | Rueang Ching                                     | 2006-2007 | Vichart Somkaew                            |
| Ong-bak                       | องค์บาก                                  | Ong-bak  | 2003      | Prachya Pinkaew                            |
| Our Farm, Our Home            | บ้านไร่ของเรา                            | Baan Rai Naa Rao                                 | 1942      | -  |
| Ploy                          | พลอย                                     | Ploy   | 2007      | Pen-Ek Rattanaurung                        |
| Rainbow                       | ทวงรักสีรุ้ง                             | Thang Rak Si Rung                                | 2003      | Yukthna Khunkhongstiw                      |
| Rainbow Boy                   | เรนโบว์บอย..รุ้งตัวที่แปด<br>องค์ความรัก | Rainbow Boy Rung Tua Thi Paet<br>Khong Khwam Rak | 2005      | Thunyathorn Sivanukroa                     |
| Sagai United                  | ซาไกยูไนเต็ด                             | Sagai United                                     | 2004      | Somching Srisuparp                         |
| Scarlet Desire                | -  | Scarlet Desire                                   | 2001      | Anucha Boonyawatana                        |
| Shutter                       | ชัตเตอร์ กดติดวิญญาณ                     | Shutter Kot Tit Winyan                           | 2004      | Bunjong Pisunthanagoon<br>Pakpoom Wongpoom |
| Sick Nurses                   | สาวลากไส้                                | Suai Lak Sai                                     | 2007      | Tosapon Siriwat<br>Peerapan Lhauyon        |
| Silence in D minor            | -  | Silence in D minor                               | 2006      | Chalida Uabumrungjit                       |
| Silom Soi2                    | -  | Silom Soi2                                       | 2005      | Piya Rangsitienchai                        |
| Spicy Beauty Queen of Bangkok | ปล้นนยะ                                  | Plon Na Ya                                       | 2004      | Poj Anmon                                  |
| Spider-Man 1                  | ไอ้แมงมุม 1                              | Ai Maengmum 1                                    | 2002      | Sam Raimi                                  |
| Spider-Man 2                  | ไอ้แมงมุม 2                              | Ai Maengmum 2                                    | 2004      | Sam Raimi                                  |
| Spider-Man 3                  | ไอ้แมงมุม 3                              | Ai Maengmum 3                                    | 2007      | Sam Raimi                                  |
| Stories from the North        | เรื่องเล่าจากเมืองเหนือ                  | Rueang Lao Chak Mueang Nuea                      | 2006      | Urupong Raksasat                           |
| Superman Returns              | ซูเปอร์แมน รีเทิร์นส                     | Superman Returns                                 | 2006      | Bryan Singer                               |
| Suriyothai                    | สุริโยไท                                 | Suriyothai                                       | 2001      | Mom Chao Chatrichalerm<br>Yukol            |
| Syndromes and a Century       | แสงศตวรรษ                                | Saeng Satawat                                    | 2006      | Apichatpong Weerasethakul                  |

| English title   | Thai title  | Romanized Thai title   | Year | Director                        |
|---|---|--|------|---------------------------------|
| Taxi Driver   | ทองพูน โขกโพ<br>ราษฎร์เต็มขั้น                      | Thongphun Khok Pho<br>Ratsadon Tem Khan                            | 1977 | Mom Chao Chatrichalerm<br>Yukol |
| Teacher Somsri  | ครูสมศรี  | Khru Somsri  | 1986 | Mom Chao Chatrichalerm<br>Yukol |
| Tears of the Black Tiger  | ฟ้าทะลายโจร   | Fa Thalai Chon   | 2000 | Wisit Sasanatieng               |
| The Adventure of Iron Pussy   | หัวใจทรนง   | Huachai Thon Nong  | 2003 | Apichatpong Weerasethakul       |
| The Angel of Bar 21   | เทพธิดาบาร์ 21                                      | Thephida Bar 21  | 1978 | Euthana Mukdasanit              |
| The Blood of Thai Soldier   | เลือดทหารไทย  | Luad Thahan Thai   | 1934 | -                               |
| The Bodyguard 2   | บอดีการ์ดหน้าเหลี่ยม 2                              | Bodyguard Na Liam 2  | 2007 | Mum Jokmok                      |
| The Ceiling   | -   | The Ceiling  | 2005 | Nonzee Nimibutr                 |
| The Elephant Keeper   | คนเลี้ยงช้าง  | Khon Liang Chang   | 1987 | Mom Chao Chatrichalerm<br>Yukol |
| The Jasmine in Pattani  | แม่พวงมาลัย   | Mae Phuangmalai  | 2007 | Weangkwan Prasongmaninil        |
| The King Maker  | กบฏ ท้าวศรีสุดาจัน                                  | Kabot Thao Si Suda Chan  | 2005 | Lek Kitipaporn                  |
| The King of the White Elephant  | พระเจ้าช้างเผือก                                    | Phrachao Changphueak   | 1940 | Pridi Banomyong                 |
| The Last Song   | เพลงสุดท้าย   | Phleng Sutthai   | 1985 | Pisal Akraseranee               |
| The Last Song   | เพลงสุดท้าย   | Phleng Sutthai   | 2006 | Pisal Akraseranee               |
| The Legend of the King Naresuan<br>part1:<br>Hongsawadee's Hostage      | ตำนานสมเด็จพระนเรศวร<br>มหาราช<br>ภาคองค์ประกันหงสา | Tamnan Somdet Phra Naresuan<br>Maha Rat<br>Phak Ong Prakan Hong Sa | 2007 | Mom Chao Chatrichalerm<br>Yukol |
| The Legend of the King Naresuan<br>part2:<br>Reclamation of Sovereignty | ตำนานสมเด็จพระนเรศวร<br>มหาราช<br>ภาคประกาศอิสรภาพ  | Tamnan Somdet Phra Naresuan<br>Maha Rat<br>Phak Prakat Isonphap    | 2007 | Mom Chao Chatrichalerm<br>Yukol |
| The Love Culprit  | จำเลยรัก  | Chamloei Rak   | 2006 | Sanchai Chotirosseranee         |
| The Memory  | รักจั่ง   | Rak Chang  | 2006 | Hemund Chetamee                 |
| The Odd Couple  | คู่แสด  | Khu Raet   | 2007 | Noparat Phutha-rattanamee       |
| The Overture  | โหมโรง  | Homrong  | 2004 | Ittisuntorn Wichailuck          |
| The Rocket  | แข่งบั้งไฟ  | Khaeng Bangfai   | 2006 | Urupong Raksasat                |

| English title        | Thai title   | Romanized Thai title | Year | Director                                    |
|----------------------|--------------|----------------------|------|---|
| The Rural Teacher    | ครูบ้านนอก   | Khru Bannok          | 1978 | Surasee Patham                              |
| The Siam Renaissance | ทวิภพ        | Thawi Phop           | 2004 | Surapong Pinitka                            |
| The Sun Lover        | -            | The Sun Lover        | 2006 | Anucha Boonyawatana                         |
| The Truth Be Told    | -            | The Truth Be Told    | 2007 | Pimpaka Towira                              |
| Tom Yum Goong        | ต้มยำกุ้ง    | Tom Yum Goong        | 2005 | Prachya Pinkaew                             |
| Tongpan              | ทองปาน       | Tongpan              | 1977 | Euthana Mukdasanit,<br>Surachai Jantimatorn |
| Tortured Love        | รักทรมาน     | Rak Thoraman         | 1987 | Pisal Akraseranee                           |
| Total Bangkok        | -            | Total Bangkok        | 2006 | Pen-Ek Rattanaurang                         |
| Tropical Malady      | สัตว์ประหลาด | Sat Pralat           | 2004 | Apichatpong Weerasethakul                   |
| Unknown Forces       | -            | Unknown Forces       | 2007 | Apichatpong Weerasethakul                   |
| Voodoo Girls         | -            | Voodoo Girls         | 2002 | Thunskaa Pansittivorakul                    |

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## BIOGRAPHY

Takayuki Akiba was born in Chiba, Japan. He graduated from Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba, Japan with B.A. in English and Area Studies (Hons). After his graduation, he worked as a systems engineer at a system integrator firm in Tokyo for three years. His strong interest in Thai contemporary culture, especially Thai cinema, brought him to Thailand. In 2005, he enrolled in the M.A. in Thai Studies program at Chulakongkorn University, Bangkok. He received a grant from the Rotary Foundation for two years, as a Rotary international ambassadorial scholar.



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